ECHOES FROM THE STONE

Reframing Preservation in Syria Through Haurani Folklore

by

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ABSTRACT

Partially buried in the landscape of Hauran in southern Syria, my family's 1500-year-old house, Alali—formerly a Byzantine church—further erodes with each passing year. Throughout the decades, the house has been subjected to various forms of destruction: from development, demolition, and rocket strikes to violent reconstruction. Its crumbling stones are laden with the memories of four generations and echo with a way of life that is disappearing. At the heart of Hauran are the fellahin, farmers who permanently settled in its villages in the late 19th century. As they settled, the fellahin reclaimed, inhabited, dismantled, and rebuilt the Byzantine structures, often rearranging or reimagining the original programs: chapels, houses, and cemeteries. In my family's border village of Nasib—a place both liminal and at the margin—this rich local history lives not in formal archives but in scattered material like architectural ruins, oral poems, folk songs, diasporic transcripts, and 8mm video cassettes, many of which resonate as sonic artifacts. What began as a project of documenting the decay of our old house evolved into a meditation and manifesto on preservation outside the purview of top-down institutions. Through creative writing and cinematic intervention, *Echoes from the Stone* asks: what does it mean to preserve a place, and preservation for whom? In this proposed paradigm, 'story' becomes integral to architectural preservation. This story of Alali interweaves my journal entries with the encounters of my great-great grandfather, Hassan Ali, an oral poet who founded the village. I further draw from my grandfather Faisal's diaries, our family's archival videos, and interviews with Nasib's elders, including my grandmother Um Ghazi, an olive farmer, and Um Saado, a Bedouin matriarch and shepherd who once lived in the old home with her family. By foraging for this counter-archive of living memories, I reveal intergenerational intersections which complicate and reimbue the colonial history of the village—and of Syria—with voices that echo from the stone, voices that persist and whisper from the ground, from across borders and oceans, and from within. This interdisciplinary chronicle draws from architecture, agriculture, literature, anthropology, and film, to reconstruct a social history of the village and speculate on alternate ways of dwelling, building, and preserving—reclaiming the archive, reinserting narrative, and reframing heritage through the folklore of Hauran.

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To my mother, Ilham,

You taught me the meaning of home, of country, of poetry.
I love you.

To Jidda,

Matriarch of our family, mother to four hundred olive trees. Thank you for teaching me how to plant things.

Finally,

Jiddo Faisal,

You left before I could tell you that I carry your songs and stories with me forever.
I miss you. Rest in peace.

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QIFA NABKI

'Qifa nabki'. Stop, let us weep. A call to pause, to dismount, to come down to earth, to face the signs of destruction and loss, and to weep in torrents. In Arabic poetics, this classical motif is known as al-waqf ala al-atlal: 'standing at the ruins.'[1]

- *Sofia Samatar*

Fig 1. Spring Caterpillars Build a Communal Web, *Echoes from the Stone*, Nasib 2024, film still.

[1] Here Samatar is reflecting on a verse by the famed 6th century Arab poet, Imru al-Qays. It is an excerpt from one of the *Mu'alaqat*, or 'Hanging Odes,' a series of poems predating Islam, which were considered so linguistically beautiful and sacred, they were inscribed on the Kaaba in Mecca. See "Standing at the Ruins," *The White Review*, Essay Issue no. 30, November 2021.

It is common in traditional Arabic oral poetry to open the recitation with a *muqaddima*, a contemplative foreword or preamble. At times, it unpacks a deep torment or longing, with a sheepish repentance to God before launching into a love sonnet. Some muqaddimat contain a playful riddle or fable, immediately demanding a certain level of curiosity and attentiveness from the audience. The meditative muqaddima is a pause before the journey, an embodiment of the poet's emotional framework. It is not only an introduction to the poem, but a glimpse into the poet's process. Oral poetry relies on these moments of vulnerability and encounter—with the divine, with a place, with others, with oneself.

Thus, in keeping with the traditions of this poetry, our story begins with an intimate moment of encounter, of contemplation. Nearly two centuries ago, after months of trekking through the plains of Southern Syria, my maternal great-great grandfather, Hassan Ali Almahamid scaled a hill to reach the stone ruins which would become our family's first house. Standing there on the ruins, staring out at the land below, he recited to his son:

> I oversaw a lookout, vast and tall,
> a lookout that towers over all other lookouts
> I contemplated of this world, a deep contemplation.
> I repented to a Lord who is fearsome, yet unafraid!
> I do not speak of it all, I do omit
> For [my] pain—is the foundation—on which I build my verse.

Isn't it eerily fateful that today, his great-great granddaughter—born two centuries and an ocean away—sifts through his verses for comfort, meaning, inspiration, and answers? That for the last three years, my main preoccupation has been dissecting them and unraveling their meanings in a language he didn't speak. That four generations later, Hassan Ali's moment of inspiration and sorrow, tenderly passed down to his son, is reincarnated here, for the reader, through his descendant.

I regretfully admit that unlike my ancestor, Hassan Ali, I am not an oral poet—only a believer in the extraordinary power of poetry to reveal and to heal. My translations of Hassan Ali's verses are humble and limited, in several ways. Firstly, because I've prioritized communicating the meaning of the verses, I've stripped them of a fundamental element: their rhyme and rhythm. Second, by transcribing these verses that were meant to be recited orally to others, they've lost much of their aurality. In my effort to preserve and share something so precious, I have inadvertently changed it, in some ways beyond recognition. I humbly ask that the reader forgive my shortcomings. I am bound by the chains of this language you read, the language in which I was schooled, the language in which I'm best able to express myself.

When I was a child, my mother enforced a strict Arabic-only rule in our house. She knew that living in America, English would inevitably dominate our lives, so in our home, she taught me and my brother Omar her native language. While the other kids in school watched cartoons and slept in over the weekend, I attended Sunday school in a dimly-lit, musty community mosque, where a well-meaning yet slightly temperamental Egyptian

auntie taught me to read the Quran. While my friends grew up listening to rock n roll and watching MTV, Mama's cassette player bumped hour-long Umm Kulthum ballads, and Al Jazeera blared on our TV. It was important to her that we inherit the culture she carried across the Atlantic and guarded like a small, vulnerable flame. Growing up, I was resentful of Mama's Arabic-only rule, until I reached high school and realized most of my Arab American friends couldn't speak with their grandparents. My first understanding of what it means to preserve things comes from my mother.

In some ways the preservation of cultural objects and practices is not unlike making jam or *preserves*. As Shaw colorfully suggests, "language is the oldest sugar to bind the fruit of past moments into a gel of memory, merging chronicled events with tall and short tales that transferred myth from mind to mind."[2] It is language that has allowed me to simultaneously dwell in two places. With the privilege of an American passport, I traverse borders with ease, experiencing, as Feghali poetically suggests, "a version of time, kinship, and mobility more reminiscent of my grandparents' era, where traveling between Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt…was as easeful and common as the seeds and rivers that bind us."[3] Every year, Mama took me and Omar to the Syrian countryside to visit our grandparents, Jidda and Jiddo. As a child, I was overjoyed when these visits coincided with Spring, my favorite season. On clear April days, Jidda and Jiddo would

[2] Wendy Shaw, "Preserving Preservation: Maintaining Meaning in Museum Storage," in *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt*, edited by Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, (London: 2018), 153.
[3] Layla K. Feghali, *The Land in Our Bones: Plantcestral Herbalism and Healing Cultures from Syria to the Sinai--Earth-based pathways to ancestral stewardship and belonging in diaspora*, (North Atlantic Books: 2024), 3.

gather all the cousins and we'd venture out to their farmland for foraging. Out in the fields under the vast sky, we'd pick wild *bazella* (snow peas), *akkoub* (thistle), *khubeiza* (mallow), and *jarjeer* (arugula), bring the green treasure home and prepare it together. I wish I could tell my younger self to savor those dinners, to count them, to enjoy them while they lasted.

Fig 2. The first Poppies of the season sprout in Nasib's fields, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024

Spring in Nasib, Once Again. February 2024

It’s the beginning of poppy season in Nasib, and the air is damp with the smell of rain. After three years of unprecedented drought, the village finally saw weeks of downpour, rendering everything in vibrant shades of green. Jidda took us on a walk to Mama’s land, where the family planted wheat in her absence. We passed the railroad tracks where my cousins and I played as kids. “See the new mansions people are building?” Jidda points. We stroll through new construction sites with their austere concrete rebar, and streets piled with rubble. On one corner, an electrical pole is split in half. “It was a barrel bomb,” Jidda notes.

Mama and Jidda walk ahead, I meander behind, taking videos, noticing how Mama walks like Jidda, and how I walk like Mama. Right foot, left foot, Inhale, exhale. Time is like a magnet, pulling us in different directions. As we walk together, the land also beckons each of us to its different abodes. Jidda is drawn to her plants. She carefully inspects the wheat seedlings, rubs a young budding olive branch between her fingers, plucks two flowers from the ground and hands them to me and mama. “Look, Ilham, see how the wheat is already sprouting?”

Mama nods absentmindedly and looks at the sky. She points to the birds in the trees, wonders how long they’ve traveled, hopes that they are well fed. She whips out her phone and takes a photograph. Maybe she sees me and my brother in the birds and their constant migrations. Or maybe she traces her own path along their wings.

Fig 3. Keffiyeh Buried in the Soil, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024.

My eyes are always drawn to the ground. I look at it like I'm searching for salvation. Like a hungry child reaching for bread. I feel the urge to lay in it for hours. To touch my forehead to the burnt umber clay and whisper a little prayer. I pick up a stone and roll it in my palm, running my fingers across its tiny grooves. From this point of view, the grass is a forest canopy. A tattered keffiyeh is embedded in the soil, and clovers sprout from between its red and white threads. I wonder who it belonged to and how it ended up here. My eyes scan the brush and spot a nest of fuzzy golden caterpillars. Their communal web glistens as it catches the light. From this point of view, I envy the caterpillars! Unlike them, I'm often lonely. Unlike them, I'm unsure where on this green earth I'll be buried.

Jidda and Mama call to me, and I run, always a few steps behind them. I want to capture these moments; bottle them up, press them like olives, make them live longer, savor them forever. To gather up all their knowledge, as much as I can with my broken Arabic, and force my wandering mind to focus before it's too late. I'm afraid that I'll be the last in our bloodline to know this land. That when Mama and Jidda are gone, they'll leave me empty, with nothing to pass on to the next generation.

Fig 4. I Follow Mama and Jidda through the Fields, Nasib, 2024.

My last childhood visit was in 2005. None of us knew then what would become of the country. Jiddo passed away in 2011, in the early days of the uprising, while we were an ocean away. Omar and I never got to say goodbye, nor attend his funeral. On some level, I think part of me is glad he didn't live to see the state of things today—it would have broken his heart. Diasporic mourning is complex in its seasons. It is a grief without closure. In your mind's eye, you imagine the people you love to always be waiting in that distant place of your childhood.

> Life passes in tandem. What happens there does not always happen here. Our grief is postponed…Those who don't go back are sometimes held captive by their grief forever, carrying their sadness everywhere they go…Experiencing a death in the diaspora is like watching your life on a film reel. There are no bodies to bury. There are no belongings to pack away. There is no funeral tent. And even as guests come through the door, our self-made family in a self-made exile, there is a loneliness to the heartache.[4]

Today, most Syrians separate time into two eras; "before the crisis" and "the crisis." It feels we are always doomed to be nostalgic towards a past that is rosier in our collective imagination. I am particularly guilty of this; truthfully, I would give anything to reach back in time, to unearth the poems, fables, and remedies that were buried with Jiddo, but mostly, to touch his hand to my forehead. I write this because—like mama once was—I am afraid; that somehow, I will be the one to extinguish a flame safeguarded by our ancestors through the centuries. As Wendy Shaw so poignantly suggests, to preserve something is "not to keep it as it was, but to recognise that as it is, it cannot keep."[5] Indeed, I'm afraid

[4] Tasbeeh Herwees, "Grief in the Diaspora," *The Toast*, August 4, 2015, https://the-toast.net/2015/08/04/grief-in-the-diaspora/
[5] Wendy Shaw, "Preserving Preservation: Maintaining Meaning in Museum Storage," in

of a collective forgetting. That as we rebuild our houses atop the ruins, we unwittingly drown our ancestor's legacies in concrete. That our memories will be buried forever in the rubble.

Yes, I write this out of fear, but mostly because I grieve. I grieve the alternate life that this violence and destruction has robbed from us. I grieve old familiar places, and the old familiar people that filled them with love and music and laughter. As Samatar suggests, "To stand at the ruins is to succumb to memory. It is to be pierced, undone." Standing at the ruins, where great poets of the past once stood, I am confronted by these flickering memories—and engulfed in the dusts of their sadness I am paralyzed, subdued, suffocated. I see the past in the ruins, but simultaneously I see myself. As Zora Neale Hurston so beautifully writes, "like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say."[6]

Time and place are curiously circular in this way; perhaps it is no coincidence that Hassan Ali stood at the ruins atop Nasib's hill all those decades ago, and I stand at the same ruins today. Like my ancestor, pain is the foundation on which I build my prose—written from across an ocean to a place I can never call my own. I write this, because despite the grief, I am still hopeful; despite the grief, I believe that stories carry remedies. It is stories that cut through the pain and noise and teach us that something else is possible.[7] Yes, we carry our sadness wherever we go, but we also carry these stories. The

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Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt, edited by Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, 152. London: Routledge. 2018

[6] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* J. B. Lippincott, 1942.

[7] See Vivien Sansour's beautiful work, "Something Else is Possible," Exhibited at Fotoindustria Biennale, Bologna, Italy 2021.

same painful pasts that hold us hostage can also set us free. No, I am not a poet; I am a forager searching for the beauty and sustenance that still sprouts from our devastation.

Fig 5. Rubble, Soil, and Construction Waste Line the Street in Nasib, 2021

WHEN EVERYTHING WE BUILT TURNS TO DUST

…there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture; and the latter in some sort includes the former, and is mightier in its reality; it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life.[8]

-John Ruskin

[8] *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*

It was a quiet Wednesday afternoon in Nasib, Syria, when my *Jidda*, known as Um Ghazi, was tending to her olive trees. She crouched down to pick thorny weeds from the earth with rough hands that like most *fellahin*, or land cultivators, were protected by a thick layer of calluses. In her amber-colored hijab and tattered blue abaya dusted with red soil, she appeared to be part of the landscape, not unlike the age-old basaltic bluestones scattered across her garden. Each morning, when the *fajr adhan*[9] was called, she rose before the sun to pray and greet her trees. She spent most of her days this way, just as her parents had before her, and generations of fellahin before them. As she reached up to prune a stubborn branch, she felt the earth rumble beneath her feet. It wasn't the first rupture in Nasib, especially in the past four years.

Fig 6. Bluestones and Basaltic Vessels in Jidda's Garden, Nasib, 2023.

[9] Islamic pre-dawn call to prayer

"What was it this time?" she stared up at the sun. "Maybe it was an earthquake," she hoped.

The neighbors peered over the fence. "Um Ghazi, did you feel that?!"

Before she could respond, her phone rang; on the other line, her cousin screamed, "Um Ghazi, Um Ghazi, come quick! Your husband's old house!"

The house in question, formerly an abandoned Byzantine church, was discovered and reinhabited around 1860 by my ancestor, Hassan. He named the house *Alali*, or the heights, for its unique position overlooking the village.

Fig 7. Alali's chapel, Nasib, 2003, Photograph by Wafaa Almahamid.

Ownership of the building was passed down to my grandfather Faisal until Jidda inherited it in 2011 after his passing. Her heart sank. “Alali is two kilometers away.” Desperate, she ran out into the street and towards the old quarter of the village. As she walked, she reminisced. Her babies had walked, played, and sang in that house. “Where are you, my children?” She wondered sadly. Now half of them live oceans away, each in a different country.

Finally, her sandals crunched on the gravel road of the old neighborhood. All around her, vehicles had surrounded the site. She could hardly see anything through a thick fog, but voices clamored around her. Her eyes could vaguely make out a group of neighbor men bickering nearby,

“Was it an explosion?”

“It was a barrel bomb; trust me I’ve seen it before.”

“It can’t have been a bomb, I’m telling you it was too powerful!”

Slowly their words settled in. It wasn’t fog that surrounded her; it was ash.

When a rocket struck the old neighborhood on that grim Wednesday in Nasib, the 1,500-year-old bluestones of Alali’s staircase flew into the air, like a cloud raining deadly anvils. Passersby screamed and ran for cover, but there was no refuge in sight. The 100kg bluestones pelted the neighbor’s yard and broke her leg. Generational olive trees were uprooted. Hopeful arms reached out to one another through the hazy cloud of ash. Before the dust could settle, an eager voice broke the heavy silence and exclaimed, “The treasure of Faisal’s house has been unearthed!” It was a cry heard ‘round the village; one voice quickly became a lustful chorus shouting “The treasure! The treasure!” A frenzy ensued as

a group of villagers made their way towards the rubble, while others shouted, “Um Ghazi, where are you!?”

Um Ghazi’s house, Alali, had long been rumored to hide Byzantine gold and artifacts beneath its stone floors. Onlookers gathered around the site, gaping at the wreckage until she barked at them to disperse. The pulverized stone had colored the historic quarter of the village white. There was a surreal beauty in the devastation; to an unknowing eye, it looked like Nasib was dusted with a layer of fresh snow. Um Ghazi memorialized the incident as “the day of white dust.”

Today, she feels like little remains of the traditional ways of life except for debris; a painful reminder that something else once existed. Only thirty years ago, Nasib’s historic buildings were inhabited by families whose presence enriched the village with a vibrant living culture. Today, this culture is at risk of disappearing altogether. Alali has evolved from an abandoned landmark to a thriving community forum, a family home, and finally reduced to broken arches standing uncertainly amid wreckage. The rocket strike on Alali was just one incident in a pattern of destruction in Nasib—and Syria at large. Throughout the years, the old chapel-turned-family heirloom has embodied the shifting sociopolitical climate brewing outside its grounds.

As a family stakeholder and as an architect, I am unable to assess the building’s fate from a cool distance. I was devastated upon learning of the site’s destruction; in some way, it felt like my Jiddo Faisal had died all over again. When I revisit the old neighborhood, I am confronted not only with his passing, but with the material death of a childhood I once knew.

Sixteen Years Later, A Return, January 2021

Sixteen years have passed and still
Red earth glistens against the vast blue sky,
green olive trees and bluestone
White dust and gray concrete...
...The colors of the landscape haven't changed;
Shepherds wander with their flocks while motorcycle engines hum,
The smell of gasoline and burnt rubber fills the air.
Children walk through the streets with their backpacks,
Gone are the blue school uniforms we used to wear.

I sit in the car with my mother's memories,
Lovingly exchanged with her sister from the passenger seat,
"Remember when we walked to our aunt Khadija's house from here?"
Wishing I could freeze this moment,
Knowing the Fairouz song on the radio will be ruined forever after this
I should feel happy. We are here, we are together,
Yet all I want to do is cry.

On the corner, the welder fires new doors,
The butcher hangs freshly skinned lambs in the window display
By the railroad, the adhan rings out of a makeshift mosque-tent.
After bombs exploded at the old mosque in 2018, people grew afraid to pray there.When I close my eyes, I see my Jiddo Faisal riding to the mosque on his electric scooter every Friday until his final days
Feeling almost glad he wasn't here to see this.

We turn into a street and the car comes to a stop.
Are we picking something up?
We're home! Didn't you recognize it? My aunt asks
What was there to recognize?
The front yards where we played with the neighbor kids were now enclosed with stone walls pierced by bullet holes.
Was this really the street of our innocence? –

Over the past three years, I've begun to study and document the history of the village, which selfishly gives me some respite from this grief, but also feels increasingly urgent in the aftermath of the crisis and the ensuing ramifications the village is facing today. What began as documenting Alali's material condition evolved into a rethinking of the methodologies I am trained in and curiosity about local preservation practices outside the purview of top-down institutions. My interest in Alali's formal qualities shifted to a preoccupation with its symbolic importance. For centuries, the local landmark has safeguarded an unwritten history of Nasib. Alali's walls have indeed, as Ruskin once poetically put it, "long been washed by the passing waves of humanity,"[10] but I fear that as the waves continue to pass it will be forgotten. It is a special kind of sorrow, after all, watching our ways of life fade into history before our eyes.

If remembrance is the antidote, where are the archives that preserve such elusive ephemera as these memories uprooted from their place? If an old building is like a shore marked and eroded by humanity's passing tides, what would Alali whisper about those crashing waves, and what they sounded like? Can we trace the building's goosebumps, or collect its tears? How can we listen to the voices that echo from the stone? After all, basalt is the bedrock of this land; scaffolding for the roots of its olive trees, quarried with the blood, sweat, and tears of the masons, transported on the backs of camels and mules. In this sense, the stone is a space where fragmented memories are embodied,[11] a conduit for the rich intangible heritage it once sheltered.

[10] John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, (New York, J. Wiley, 1849), 234
[11] Veysel Apaydin, *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage*, (UCL Press: 2020), 16

- At the door, Jidda embraces me, her warm familiar scent of olive oil soap,
The cold tiles beneath my feet were scrubbed clean to welcome us.
Everything looks smaller than I remember; gone is the lush canopy of grapes above the entryway, but the jasmines are still fragrant.

In the living room, the same tiny Toshiba from 1990 plays Al Jazeera.
A dull ache tears through my side, the one I buried all these years.
There it was: the mat where Jiddo used to sit, the hook where he hung his coat,
His coffee pot we sipped from, secretly.

It's all there, but the air is heavier now.
Sixteen years have passed
and now it's harder to breathe,
Under the weight of his absence.

Fig 8. Aunt Wafaa Helps Jiddo Plant the Grapevine, Nasib, 1996.
8mm film still, filmed and digitized by Ilham Almahamid.

This is not to fall into the self-indulgent trap of memorializing Alali as a monument, nor will this be an application for Nasib to become a UNESCO site. It is precisely this universalist framework[12] of heritage preservation that I find deeply troubling. While I am trained as an architect, I've grown increasingly wary of my profession's pedagogy and traditional visual tools and feel that alone they are insufficient to tell this story. To be an Architect is to always project; Architects don't see, we look. We survey, calculate, plan, propose, produce, and project: literally—in our systems of measurement and representation—and metaphorically, in the way we project our visions and aspirations onto places and people. The architect records to project, to design/build places that are productive, and/or efficient, and/or attractive. While "do no harm," is a tenet of the Hippocratic oath, there is no equivalent promise from the Architect. Architects are not asked to be guardians of a moral code; they are asked to design, and most importantly, to ensure their designs can be built.[13] Can one still be considered an architect if they seek to unbuild, deconstruct, and dismantle? Is there a desperate need for counter-architects?

It is because of these questions that I am not compelled to produce grand architectural plans for Alali. Not only because of the deeply violent legacy these modes of *looking* have imprinted on Nasib's landscape, but also due to their static, fixed nature. Especially as someone who is not a resident of Syria and likely won't be for the foreseeable future. To be clear, I am not advocating for destruction, nor am I making a case against the act of building. Rather, I wonder—like many who have grown

[12] Anna Karlström, "Local Heritage and the Problem with Conservation," in *Transcending the Culture-Nature Divide in Cultural Heritage*, 152

[13] Many of these ideas and questions around architecture and morality were exchanged in a student discussion led by Dr. Nasser Rabbat.

disenchanted with the profession—whether there is an urgent need for architects to slow down. As Kidlat Tahimik suggests, the gift of time allows room "for the cosmos" to enter a project, for unexpected twists and contemplative turns.[14] In the case of places like Alali, the generally accepted heritage discourse would call for restoration of the building to its 'original' or 'complete' state. But isn't this just a way of manufacturing amnesia? Is it really preservation if we are erasing the more painful histories of a place?

Arabic poetic tradition teaches us the symbolic and cultural power of the ruin; that even in its desolate state, it is a site that generates art, literature, philosophy, and *emotion*. In its disrepair and abandonment, the ruin invites the mind to wander to other times and places. In its decaying state, and in the general absence of regulation, Alali has resisted the architect's canonical tendency to project upon and memorialize the ruin. This is not to romanticize the ruin or suggest that it is inherently noble or liberatory; it is to recognize that in its destruction, it takes on a form so nuanced that it somehow escapes our attempts at its categorization. Across the region, the ruin has been a cultural "blank page on which to inscribe a variety of meanings."[15] As Anna Karlström suggests, "If heritage is about remembering the past and contributes to people's identities, then destruction and consumption of the archaeological record – the loss of heritage – help us remember even better and might strengthen our identities even more."[16] Karlström further reveals how because "a complete thing or building" is the measure of a successful preservation project,

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[14] Kidlat Tahimik, "Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full Tank-Cum-Credit Card Fillmaking." *Discourse 11*, no. 2 (1989): 80–86.
[15] D. F. Ruggles. "Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in Al-Andalus." *Ars Orientalis 23* (1993): 176. 171–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4629447.
[16] Anna Karlström, "Local Heritage and the Problem with Conservation," in *Transcending the Culture-Nature Divide in Cultural Heritage*, 147

"the consequence is often an unacquainted denial of a thing's life between construction and decay."[17] And isn't decay and destruction just as much a part of Alali's story as the grandeur and persistence of its stones?

If there is healing to be found in collective remembering, perhaps the question then becomes, *how* will we remember, together? The question of method is pressing, especially as I stand not only at the ruin of Alali, but what is arguably the ruin of a discourse; one that persistently invalidates any scholarship that exists outside the "templelike" archive establishment.[18] Because Alali's history is less linear, and more cumulative like a carrier basket[19], the site makes a case for a restoration project that is "full of detours and explorable nooks."[20] For inefficiency and incompleteness. A process that is less like striking a target with the sword and more like foraging with a basket.[21] In this departure from traditional architectural methodologies of documenting and preserving a site's history, the possibility emerges of reconstructing and reframing history through an interdisciplinary approach to preservation and archive-making; one that is embodied.

[17] Karlström, 143
[18] Amin Alsaden, "The Counter-Archive: Eluding the Erasures of Iraq's Successive Wars" *The American Archivist* (2023) 86 (2): 419–435
[19] Ursula Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* New York: Grove Atlantic Press, 1989
[20] Tahimik, 82
[21] Ursula Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* New York: Grove Atlantic Press, 1989.

As Amin Alsaden suggests,

> Like maps, archives are often produced by those who possess the power to create them, and to acquire, control, and spread knowledge. The counter-archive asks how divergent, bottom-up, and nonhierarchical archives can be created, and what kind of narratives can be told through a closer alignment with the protagonists and their grassroots culture.[22]

Thus, this reconstruction of Alali's story interweaves my own reflections and travelogues with the poetic encounters of my ancestor, Hassan Ali. I further draw from interviews with Nasib's elders, including Um Ghazi, Sabha El Jabr, our longtime neighbor, and Um Saado, a Bedouin matriarch and shepherd who once lived in the old home with her family. In this proposed paradigm, 'story' becomes integral to architectural preservation. By foraging for this counter-archive of living memories, I reveal intergenerational intersections which complicate and reimbue the colonial history of the Nasib's built environment with voices that echo from the stone; voices that persist and whisper from the ground, from across borders and oceans, and from within.

[22] Amin Alsaden, "The Counter-Archive: Eluding the Erasures of Iraq's Successive Wars" *The American Archivist* (2023) 86 (2): 419–435

Fig 9. Jidda's Attic, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, Film Still.

Fig 10. Sorting through Mama's Cassette Tapes, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, Film Still.

Fig 11. Streamers Hang from Ceiling, Nasib, 2001, 8mm Film Still.

Attics and Basements, November 2023

My memories of childhood trips to Syria live in dozens of 8mm video cassettes, neatly packaged into plastic bins that until recently were dusting in mama's closet. After rediscovering her old camcorder, she took on the DIY project of recording and digitizing the films. It has been both immensely delightful and painful to reencounter them after twenty years.

In one tape, it is Mother's Day in 2001, and Jidda's living room is decorated with streamers. It is unclear which family member is behind the camera, but in the frame Mama sits amongst her siblings while little Omar tenderly sleeps in her lap. In the background, Mama's brother plays a keyboard rendition of Oum Kulthum's timeless ballad, *This is my Night.* Jiddo reclines on his mat, ever amused by their musical antics. Mama grips a karaoke microphone and sways lightly, her eyes are closed. Uncle Ghazi grins maniacally at the camera and waves his hands in the air like a conductor as Mama's voice, laden with emotion, sings,

With time, love finds a new abode,
and the birds abandon their branches,
And old houses, which long ago were homes,
Will see us just as we see them: wastelands.

As I listen to the melody, tears pool in my eyes. Uncle Khalid abandoned the keyboard long ago, and my eldest aunt stopped singing after her only son was killed. I am unsure which is more haunting: the ghostly living room and its cozy gathering of our family presently scattered across oceans, or the lyrics that seem to forewarn of what we- and our house- would become.

By embracing rather than dismissing the subjectivity of poetry and memory, the project takes on a more experimental nature. As Otero-Pailos suggests, "experimental preservationists gently frustrate and subvert illusory belief by choosing, as heritage, objects that have appeared too imaginary, too fantastic, too subjective to be understood as real heritage."[23] The methodology of embodied or experimental preservation is deeply related to cinematic montage. A film is a series of encounters, like a time capsule. Formally, cinema presents the opportunity to deconstruct or complicate the image, making it a powerful way to present a counter narrative, and in this case, a counter archive.

As Bruno suggests, "a frame for cultural mapping, film is modern cartography, a map of differences…"[24] Syrian filmmakers like Mohamad Malas and Omar Amiralay tackle the question of cinema in Amiralay's contemplative 1998 documentary short, *Plate of Sardines.* Set in Quneitra, the film opens with a brief history of Israel's destruction of the city recounted by Amiralay. His camera pans across Quneitra's crumbling landscape, until it lands on a building that has miraculously survived the violence— an old cinema house. As the viewer slowly enters the haunted building, a cinema reel appears and projects the filmmaker's memories through a gaping hole in the theater.

[23] Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Experimental Preservation," *Places Journal*. September 2016.

[24] Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*: *Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. (New York: Verso, 2002), 71.

Fig 12. Rewinding a clip of Jiddo, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, Film Still.
Fig 13. The Video Cuts Out, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, Film Still.

Later, Malas, a Quneitra native, walks pensively along the roof of a destroyed building. Malas reflects,

> It's true that I'm always making films about Quneitra, and Quneitra is very much linked to the struggle. The question I have inside me has retreated…is it a film about the struggle? Or is it about our cinema, which has usually been concerned with our internal pains? Of course, sometimes reality doesn't protect things…but I imagine that cinema protects them.

Through the montage, film offers the unique ability to reimbue a place with these marginalized, fragmented stories and narratives. On a surface level, the counter archive reveals a cultural and architectural history of a place which is missing from institutional accounts. On an embodied level, by reconstructing these oral, visual, relational transcripts of the liminal, the counter archive introduces the possibility of an archival afterlife, which occupies the tongue and echoes in the ear.

A big part of this work is reframing and recontextualizing the language and hierarchies of building culture in the context of this region and its traditions. Before the technology of the image and its reproduction was exported to the world, Nabati poetry was a centuries-old medium for preserving and disseminating history. Poetry was a way of orienting or locating oneself in relation to the land and others—like a highly descriptive, embodied map, or a living "atlas of emotion"[25]. Across the Arab-speaking world, these verses once wove a rich sonic tapestry, or *archive of the tongue*[26].

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[25] In *Atlas of Emotion*: Giuliana Bruno explores and maps the nuanced relationships between emotion, space, and cinema.
[26] In her book, *Archive of Tongues*, Moon Charania treats her immigrant mother (and her tongue) as an archive.

Often described as “the people’s poetry,” Nabati Poetry is one of the oldest forms of Arabic poetry. It was historically practiced by people of all genders and ages, from every social class and background across the Arabian Peninsula. Sowayan describes how the Nabati poet could be “a town amir, a tribal sheikh, a desert warrior, a daring marauder, a poor farmer, or a member of the urban elite,” and further illuminates how poets did not require formal training.[27] Although my great-great grandfather, Hassan Ali couldn’t read or write, he spun intricate tales of family, land, and country in elegant stanzas of Nabati poetry which he recited to his children. These poems were passed down and later transcribed from memory by his grandson, my Jiddo Faisal.[28]

[27] Sowayan

[28] My maternal grandfather, who was born in Nasib in 1918 and passed away in 2011.

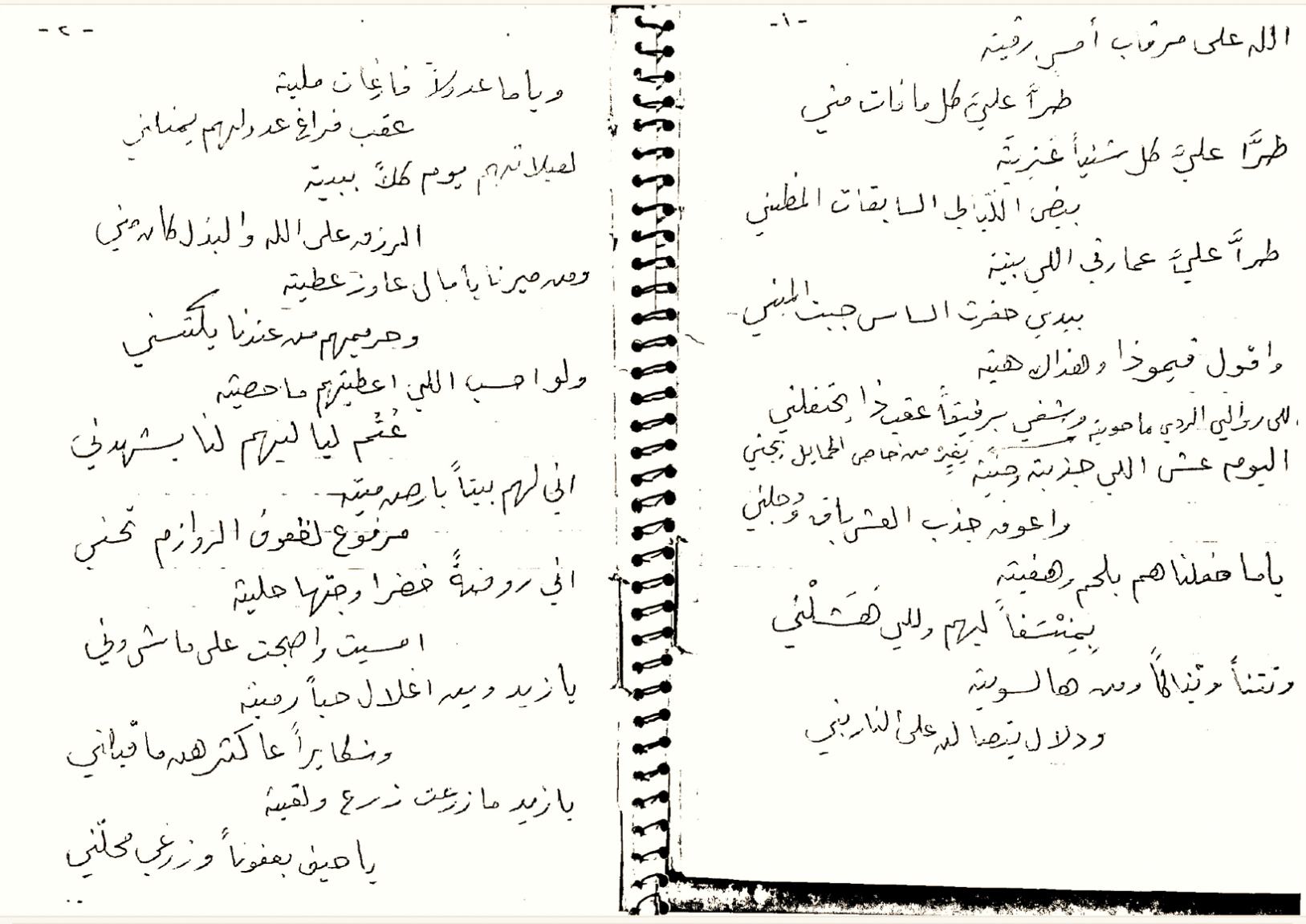

Fig 14. Poetry Transcriptions in Jiddo's handwriting, 1990s. Photographed in Damascus, 2022.

In many ways, Nasib's unwritten history is kept alive through these oral verses. In his old age, reflecting on the best years of his life, Hassan once said:

> I recall how I built imār.
> with my own hand, I dug the foundation, and brought the builder,
> And I would say, 'lift this! And bring that forth!'
> And wouldn't any friend celebrate this abundance?[29]

Here, the word imār, which translates to "architecture," or "building," refers not just to the physical building, but to the act of building a life, family, and a legacy. In fact, in Arab culture, when one passes away at a young age, it is common for loved ones to lament, *ma ammar, "*he didn't build." Among its cultural meanings, imār also encompasses physical and cultural reconstruction of one's environment.[30] As Sean Anderson suggests, "houses are built as a measure of language and, by extension, language becomes the house in which one's dreams are not only collected but also heard."[31] In this context, imār is a valuable conceptual framework through which to understand the history of dwelling and building in the region outside of colonial cartographies.

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[29] Lines 4-8 of a poem by Hassan Ali, transcribed in Arabic by Faisal Almahamid, translated to English by the Author. Estimated date: 1910-1915.

[30] Wesam Al Asali and Iyas Shahin, "Rural Habitation In Syria: The Culture Of Traditional Architecture And Its Role In The Reconstruction Process," Metu Journal of the Faculty of Architecture 2016.

[31] Sean Anderson, "For the Houses of Beirut," Aug 28 2020, https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/414#

When collected, compiled, and shared, these artifacts and poetic remnants become a counter-archive. “The counter-archive for me is now a metaphor, a methodology, and an ethos. It…questions the western epistemological monopoly and the various barriers erected to keep “other” histories from being written. The counter-archive points to the alternative materials I could manage to collect—and that I continue to consolidate today—as well as novel methods of presenting and sharing the findings to write cohesive narratives about this context.”[32]

Fig 15. Uncle Ghazi Sifts Through Burnt Photographs, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024.

[32] Amin Alsaden, “The Counter-Archive: Eluding the Erasures of Iraq's Successive Wars” *The American Archivist* (2023) 86 (2): 419–435

, ALL THAT'S LEFT IS OUR VERSE

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.[33]
-Audre Lorde

[33] Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury," The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House, 3.

Outside of early colonial surveys, there is little mention of Nasib or its built environment in Western media and literature, except for one structure that puts it on the world map: its border crossing, one of the busiest in the country. Nasib's unique position as a borderland has made it an active site of these state-building projects: from the Ottoman Empire (16th to early 20th century), British and French wartime administration (1918-1923), the French Mandatory administration (1923-46), the Syrian Ba'athist Regime to the 2011 Civil War. Histories of Syria typically examine placemaking at this "macro scale."[34] More recent scholarship illuminates how Syria is portrayed as a good example of "colonial product," in that the larger scholarly narrative has "overshadowed the local histories, all those interactions that forged the communities and their legacies."[35] Through what feels like a persistent omission, we continue to write top-down histories of Syria. Speaking on the historiography of preservation, Shaw argues,

> For history to be embodied at the site, it must be transformed from place into text such that the place becomes a representation of a history written elsewhere, reapplied to the site. History depends on this displacement of speech from the authority of those who are present in the landscape to the speech of those who view it from afar. [36]

What does it mean to write history not only from below, but from within? These histories are particularly important at a time when Syria's heritage—both tangible and intangible—is

[34] Matthieu Cimino, Syria: Borders Boundaries and the State, (Cham: Springer International Publishing) 4
[35] Matthew Rey in Cimino, Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State, (Cham: Springer International Publishing), 28-29
[36] Wendy Shaw, 157

threatened by ongoing violence and the climate crisis. What does the history of Hauran look like outside of early colonial cartography?

An abundance of surveys and travelogs were produced in the 19th century, when Greater Syria became a key destination for European scholars who set out to chart its geography, which was seen as an untapped treasure trove of antiquities.

Fig 16. "Basra Eski Sham. Two pillars of colonnade with group. Torrence, Grossman, & Terrill."

In his travels across the Levant in the mid to late 19th century, the American engineer and archaeologist Gottlieb Schumacher wrote extensively on the regions that make up the present-day Golan Heights and Hauran in Syria. His books include maps, sketches, and detailed ethnographic records of his travels.

In one of his surveys, Schumacher described Nasib as: “a medium-sized village of 50 huts with 200 residents. It is on a hill with good arable land but suffers from lack of water. Except for crosses and some cornice divisions, there are few antiquities.”[37]

Fig 17. “Map of TransJordan”, Gottlieb Schumaker, 1886, Plate A4.

[37] Gottlieb Schumacher et al, "Der Südliche Basan," (Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins: 1897), 19

The use of the word “hut” to describe Nasib’s houses is revealing. Schumacher was part of a generation of academics whose literature laid the groundwork for the impending European colonization of the region. His more notorious contemporaries, T.E Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”) and Gertrude Bell, traversed this geography and their work would play an instrumental role in the design of colonial boundaries and infrastructure. The language of improvement[38], productivity, and capital is at the heart of the colonial framework in the region.

Contemporary scholars like Laura Jane Smith unpack how archaeologists use heritage objects and sites to reaffirm and outwardly present their disciplinary identity as one of “stewardship, professionalism, and scientific objectivity.”[39] Wendy Shaw further reveals how this scientific preservation completely relied on “disassociating the present from the past” in contrast with “embodied preservation, which engages the past in the present.”[40] In the case of Syria, the French project relied less on historical “romantic-orientalist ideals,” and instead was framed as a project of tutelage. [41]

[38] Idir Ouahes, “French Mandate Syria and Lebanon Land, Ecological Interventions, and the ‘Modern’ State” in Environments of Empire, University of North Carolina Press: 2020), 61
[39] Laura Jane Smith, *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage*, London: Routledge, 2004, 195.
[40] Wendy Shaw, 159
[41] Idir Ouahes, “French Mandate Syria and Lebanon Land, Ecological Interventions, and the ‘Modern’ State” in Environments of Empire, University of North Carolina Press: 2020), 61

This rhetoric is evident in Schumacher's musings on the region's local agricultural practices, or what he perceived as a lack thereof:

> Much good land, therefore, lies fallow, for the *Fellahin* only cultivate an area round their village which is not too large for them to reach and cultivate in a day. How many thousands of acres are languishing for rational cultivation, and how easy it would be in this wide, healthy, high plateau of Jaulän and Haurân, to develop a settled industry which would yield valuable results!"[42]

Notice how the land is framed as first and foremost a means for extraction and industry, thus, the *fellahin,* whose primary crops were ba'al, *rain-fed* and who cultivated just enough land to meet their needs, are deemed ignorant or incompetent. It is ironic that the fellahin's practices, denounced by Schumacher as unproductive, are rebranded today as schools of thought like permaculture and touted as some of the most sustainable practices. These same Orientalist tropes— in which the region is framed as a place in need of Western salvation— persist today, excluding alternate legacies or understandings of preservation and building from the institutional canon. [43] Modernity and its language of progress seeks to "reduce everything according to its utility; its capacity to be exploited and used up."[44] Thus, perhaps challenging European models of productivity and imagining decolonial futures begins with shifting this language.

In English scholarship on Syria the word '*fellahin'* refers to the agrarian population of the country.[45] The far-reaching term can include landowners, tenants, and sharecroppers.

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[42] Schumaker, The Jaulân: Surveyed For The German Society For The Exploration Of The Holy Land, (Bentley: 1881), 21

[43] Mirjam Brusius, "Introduction—What is Preservation?" Review of Middle East Studies , Vol. 51, No. 2 (AUGUST 2017), pp. 177-182,178

[44] Elaine Kelly, Dwelling in the age of climate change, (Edinburgh University Press: 2017), 42

[45] This same term applies across the SWANA region, not only in Syria.

The word is typically translated to peasants,[46] which is appropriate in understanding the fellahin's position in the macro scale of class hierarchy.[47] In both English and Arabic, the word has culturally derogatory connotations, tainted with a fraught history of classism and the urban-rural divide. The colonial attitude towards the fellahin is often internalized and echoed by native dwellers; for example, city folks will refer to something perceived as gauche or flamboyant as "Fellahi."

Fig 18. "Syria. Plain of Dothan North from Tell Dothan; Women gathering grass,1912. New York State Archives, New York (State).

[46] In his book on Syria's agrarian society, Hana Battatu argues that there is no overarching "peasant category," and distinguishes between two categories of fellahin, 'peasant-gardener' and the 'agricultural peasant' the former of which dwells in proximity to urban landscapes like Al Ghuta in Damascus. Battatu claims that this category of fellahin, who cultivate challenging crops like fruit trees, are historically more skilled and less militarized than their Druze and Haurani counterparts, the 'agricultural peasants', but still recognizes the nuanced dynamics within each of these groups.

[47] "Peasants" or "peasant farmers" is the generally accepted term for fellahin used by prominent scholars on Syria

I wonder if one way to cut through the historical baggage of this term is to first examine it linguistically. The literal meaning of fellahin in Arabic is “tillers” or “ploughmen,” and its root verb, *fa-la-ha*, “to furrow, to plow; to slit, to cleave” denotes an active physical engagement with land. The word *falah,* which originates from the same root, appears in the Islamic call to prayer, encompassing ideas of prosperity, reaping the fruits of one’s labor, abundance, salvation, happiness, and well-being. The word—peasants—immediately suggests a people of scarcity, which is in tension with the lived experience and culture of the fellahin who inherently view land (both their collaborator and lifeblood) as blessed and abundant. As my grandmother Um Ghazi often recalls, “My father used to say, ‘It is better to live with little than to live with regret.’ He used to plant things, it was a symbol of his trust in God almighty.”

Fig 19. Threshing in Sahl Hawran (Hawran Plain): Farmers are Separating Wheat from Chaff. 1961. © Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, collection Eugen Wirth (CC-BY-NC-SA).

In the hopes of rethinking the fellahin in relation to land and dwelling and from the micro lens of local practice in Nasib, I propose that we abandon the word peasant for the time being and instead use the term *land cultivator*. As Kelly suggests, "language is bound up with social power structures. How we give meaning to life through language tells us about our values."[48] Nothing reveals these values more beautifully than poetry.

Um Saado, a Bedouin matriarch, family friend, and former resident of Alali has been an active member of the village's community for more than half a century. At ninety years old, her memory is still sharp as ever; she has memorized hundreds of verses in addition to her own. On a recent visit I paid her, she recited,

> Welcome is the day you arrived,
> Sapling of my heart, fields of my soul
> And I'll lay out my best abaya[49] for you,
> A greeting to the honored guest[50],

Notice how the poem tenderly describes the guest as a "sapling of the heart," and "field of the soul." It's immediately clear how these verses can't be separated from the land

[48] Kelly, 42
[49] Traditional dress
[50] A poem by recited by Um Saado, attributed to

which is their lifeblood. These *archives of the tongue* enliven history with the sensorial qualities of place. In a colorful couplet, Hassan Ali once declared:

> Three of twelve rustle with green,
> Just like a bride, they're dressed in vibrant ornament
> Six of twelve bring clouds of dust.
> And from three, the weak one shivers

Here, the mysterious units are the months of the year. Spring and its colorful blossoms are compared to a bride in her ornament. "The weak one" refers to the impoverished member of society, who didn't have the resources to brave Hauran's cold winters. This ode to the seasons reveals how intertwined the relationship is between people and land in poetic verse. These verses are deeply spatial; not only in their content, which vividly described the landscape and built environment, but also in their production and methods of transmittance. Indeed, language and place are so deeply intertwined in Arabic that the word for a stanza or couplet is "beit," which literally translates to house. The composition of Arabic poetry is architectural and mathematic, not unlike building a physical house.

If Nabati poetry is the medium of recording history, then the *madhafa*, or guest space, is where that history is disseminated. Most homes in Hauran typically have a

madhafa, however humble in size. Whether it is an addition to a home, or in the case of the Bedouin, a designated *beit sha'ar* (tent), the madhafa is meant to be a gathering space dedicated to receiving guests.[51] Madhafas also housed community gatherings; each day the chamber buzzed with fiery political debates, black coffee simmering over open fires, and stories lovingly passed from father to son in rhythmic verses of poetry.

Although the prevalence of Nabati poetry has diminished significantly with the death of my grandfather Faisal's generation, it is still safeguarded to a better degree in the Bedouin community, which has been able to preserve the tradition. The verses reveal a deep conceptual power to this poetry and its important role in people's lives, especially in relation to dwelling, land cultivation, and the act of building. As Heidegger suggests, "dwelling, thinking and Being," are parts of one whole; "how we dwell is how we understand our place in this world and the very fibre of Being."[52]

This local history is not conserved in a formal archive, but rather in the collective memory of Nasib's elders, and in the scarce collection of Byzantine architectural relics scattered across the village. Families that settled in Nasib in the late 19th century reclaimed and inhabited these structures and their various programs (chapel, cemetery, wells, storage chambers), populating the village with distinct social and built economies, ones that are at risk of disappearing today.

[51] My grandmother Um Ghazi keeps her madhafa in a tidy state so that at any given moment, my uncle's male friends can be received in the madhafa, thus maintaining the privacy of women in the main house.
[52] Ibid,

One may ask, why study the fellahin, and why are their historic practices important today? For one, much of the social, political, and environmental legacy of Syria was shaped around the 19th century by these rural communities, and this is also a global phenomenon. Batatu reveals how the growth of population "had its beginnings in the nineteenth century and was worldwide in its incidence…In Syria the phenomenon was initially related to the revival of agriculture and its gradual or fitful integration into the world trade network."[53] I will further explore the key role that agriculture played in the settlement and development of Nasib in later chapters.

It's also important to note that rural dwellers have historically made up the majority of Syria's population, but the number has gradually declined since the 1960s to 43% in 2022.[54] This decline can be attributed to several phenomena including French mandate agrarian reform, the rise of the Ba'ath party and industrialization leading to increased migration to cities. More recently, mass displacement as a result of the 2011 War, which locals today refer to as either *al Azma,* the crisis*,* or *al-Ahdaath*, the events. the ongoing drought in the region. A 2021 Immap report on ramifications of the drought in Northeast Syria noted how the lack of rainfall in these semi-arid climates has perpetuated food insecurity and the loss of people's livelihoods,[55] particularly in nomadic and agrarian communities.

[53] Batatu, 41
[54] "World Bank staff estimates based on the United Nations Population Division's World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision."
[55] Livestock Market Systems Rapid Assessment, https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/iMMAP-Livestock-Rapid-Market-Systems-Assessment-in-Northeast-Syria.pdf, 5

In the wake of these various levels of violence and uncertainty, we return to the question, how will we dwell together? As Kelly suggests, “adaptation is about future habitation. What else is survival for but the promise of a future? This concern for future habitation reveals to us the fact that adaptation is centrally about ‘dwelling’.”[56] Malcom Ferdinand further suggests that “without others, the Earth is not the Earth, only deserted or desolated ground. Inhabiting the Earth begins through relationships with others.”[57] It is with this sentiment that I seek to explore alternate ways of relating to land and dwelling with others, not to romanticize the past or merely propose a return to tradition, but in the service of building upon what has been learned from the past to find other ways of being today and in the future.

[56] Kelly, 42

[57] Malcom Ferdinand, Decolonial Ecology, (Cambridge Polity Press, 2022) 27

, RECITED FROM THE LOOKOUT TO THE LAND

Research is a type of mourning, a form of healing. You orient yourself amidst the yellowed pages of books or the clues of postcards from lives prior. Exhume the cameo ghosts of colonial reports and hand-written letters. Disobey the narrative, inject the ancestress, decentralize the bloodlines. Spark the dormant names of brown voices relegated into the peripheries of history dirtied. Motherland is an obsolete shape, a locative amnesia. But you long to pin it.[58]

- *Mariam Arcilla*

[58] "Your Tongue is a Wet Archive," in *Disobedient Daughters.* Heart of Heart Press, 2021.

One April afternoon, just before dusk, our family made the ninety-minute trip from Damascus to Nasib with my eldest uncle Ghazi as driver and guide. The sun glowed red on the horizon; a crimson mirrored by the rich hue of the soil sprawling with young wheat and barley fields. The blue outline of Suweida and Jabal El Arab loomed in the distance. "*Al Assad Ilal Abad*, "Assad, forever" was spelled with stones on the mountain, like a dystopian Hollywood sign. As we approached the plain of Hauran[59] where Nasib is situated, Ghazi began to sing a familiar tune I grew up hearing:

> Hauran, Hauran, is a paradise,
> In her plains and her plateaus.
> On her the sun never sets,
> Land of Arab-ness is our homeland!
> Oh, how we buried [in her soil],
> The armies of France and other Strangers!

The song, like many folk songs of its era, speaks to ideas of regional pride, resistance, and the soil as a force that can ultimately swallow oppressive bodies. The land—with its plains and plateaus—is the agricultural heart of *Hauran*, which has historically served as the

[59] Within Syria, this region comprises the *Sahl Hauran,* (the Plain) where Nasib is located, *Djebel Hauran,* also known as *Djebel Druze or Djebel El Arab* (Druze mountain), and the Lajat volcanic field. Although the population is predominantly Arab Sunni Muslims, there are significant pockets of Druze and Greek Orthodox communities.

country's breadbasket, and has been described as the granary of Rome. Located south of Damascus and extending into northern Jordan, Hauran has hosted several empires across the centuries, thus its settlement patterns fluctuated according to the shifting political rule. Despite the political regime changes, throughout the centuries the basaltic Byzantine buildings have persisted—due to the resilience of their material and a regional culture of adaptive reuse and architectural continuity.

Fig 20. "Series of first aerial photographs of Palestine and Syria. Volcano and crater in the Hauran Mountains, 1800," [approximately 1900 to 1920], Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

Fig 21. Jebel el-Druze & Hauran. Shahbah (ancient Philippopolis founded by Philip the Arab 232 A.D.) Roman pavement partly dug up showing thickness of paving stones." American Colony (Jerusalem). Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

The oldest known remnants of Nasib's historic built environment are its stone Byzantine structures, among them Alali.[60] However, little is known about their original inhabitants. By the 17th century, many of the towns and villages in Hauran's plains were abandoned due to Ottoman state taxation, Bedouin raids, and internal conflict between tribes. It wasn't until the 19th century that due to industrialization and rising demand for grain in the Damascus market, local actors reoccupied[61] and formally established these deserted villages. The fellahin of Hauran had grown cereals like wheat and barley for

[60] Prior to Byzantine rule, the village was part of Rome, and before that, the Nabatean Kingdom. Throughout the various empires, Bedouins have always had a strong presence and influence in the region, though their degree of direct interaction with the state varies depending on the ruling power.

[61] Norman N. Lewis, "The Frontier of Settlement in Syria, 1800-1950." International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 31, no. 1, (1955): 48.

centuries.[62] Throughout the Ottoman period, they were largely semi-nomadic, often relocating from village to village. Their movement was shaped by their varying levels of interaction with the state and ruling class, and by the abundance of land to practice *musha'a*, or communal farming.[63] The fellahin and the Bedouins were the primary inhabitants of Hauran.

Fig 22. Young Wheat Rustles in the Fields, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, Film Still.

[62] Batatu, 24
[63] Ibid, 24

In the early 19th century, Hassan Ali's ancestral clan, the Almahamid, was scattered across present-day Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. The clan built a powerful presence in the city of Al-Karak, Jordan, where they are believed to have established a small Emirate in the early 19th century. Around this time, the Ottoman state was increasingly perceived as a foreign oppressor leading to a mass uprising of Arab tribes throughout southern Syria, which quickly became a battleground. The Almahamid's powerful position in Al -Karak seemingly didn't last long. As Hassan Ali recalls in a poem,

Since the day the foreign Pasha came,
You could hear the mass of soldiers crying out,
In Wadi Bin Hammad, he conspired.
And without mercy, he double crossed our friends.
He sent our good men of Karak to the cemetery.
90 Sheikhs[64] of the Almahamid, he massacred.
And woe to us, after this catastrophe,
He gave the Za'ama[65] to Majali and his followers![66]

[64] Elders
[65] Leadership
[66] Lines 1-16 of a poem by Hassan Ali, approx. 1870, transcribed by Faisal Almahamid, translated to English by the author.

Fig 23. Wadi Bin Hammad, 2013, Wikimedia Commons.

The “foreign pasha” in question, could possibly reference the governor of Damascus, whose troops invaded the region around 1810 following widespread uprisings against the Ottoman state. According to local lore, the Almahamid sheikhs refused to surrender to the government forces and were killed by the invading troops, an event memorialized by Hassan Ali as the Almahamid Massacre. Hassan Ali’s grandfather, a clan

chief, survived the battle and relocated with his children to Daraa[67], where he instilled in his sons the regional poetic and political traditions. Although Hassan Ali never lived in Al Karak, he visited relatives there in adulthood.

Fig 24. A Hauran Train Caravan Arriving At Damascus, Syria,
Whiting View Company, 1900, Library of Congress, LOT 13724, no. 11

[67] A city approximately 15 km northeast of Nasib

After ascending one of the ancient city's stone buildings, he looked out at the land of his ancestors, and inspired, he recited:

I oversaw a mirqab, vast and built–up,
In the lands of Al-Karak, Ishaaq, the mountains of Sharah,
This temple guards a land where glory is Sunnah,
And it is Fardh for its people to defend it with the sword![68]

The word Fardh translates to *religious obligation* and *Sunnah* refers to the of prophet Muhammad, revealing a deep sense of commitment to protecting one's land and people, which Hassan Ali situates in a longer religious and cultural tradition. The "mirqab," or *lookout* is a recurring site in Hassan Ali's poems, and in Nabati poetry in general. Although it literally refers to an elevated built space it is also metaphorical. It signals one's position in society, and their relationship with others; *how they see*, and in turn *how they are seen*. The "lookout" also speaks to the process of composing this poetry, a phenomenon my uncle has likened to divine inspiration, in that the physical ascension is like a poetic pilgrimage and the fresh point of view "allows the poet to see from higher up further than ordinary mortals can see."[69]

[68] Lines 1-16 of a poem by Hassan Ali, approx. 1870, transcribed by Faisal Almahamid, translated to English by the author.
[69] Sowayan, 6

The “lookout” also appears in Um Saado’s poems, for example these solemn verses she recited to an officer in a plea to rescue her son from a difficult legal predicament:

I oversaw a mirqab, tall and vast,
And I herded for the world, I have no equal
I cannot sleep through the night,
From these tears, so heavy
I’ve kept patient like Yaqub,
God as my witness![70]

Here “Yaqub” refers to Jacob, a prophet who appears several times in the Quran, most prominently in the Chapter about Joseph. In the story, Jacob goes blind from his tears of grief over his son’s disappearance. Thus, to be a person who “oversees” a lookout, implies one’s role as a guardian of a particular place. In the case of Um Saado, as a shepherdess, this refers to the responsibility she feels over her flock, or “herd,” and as a mother over her son. In the case of Hasan Ali, it points to his family’s prestige, but also communicates his own sense of responsibility over the land and its people, another understanding of *flock.*

[70] Um Saado, In Conversation with the author, 01/25/2023

We can see how in one introduction, Hassan Ali situates himself as part of a longer tradition of patrilineal rule:

> This place we've called our homeland for a long time,
> Land of the generous and a refuge for the guest,
> Even its stubborn volcano, bends to our will,
> And the sword of Almahamid will not pardon the treacherous![71]

In a similar vein as the *mirqab*, the volcano can be understood as a landmark, referencing the physical geography of Hauran and its site in a volcanic basin. However, it is also a metaphor alluding to the Almahamid's influence and power over their community and over the land, implying that the clan has systems of infrastructure and can bend natural resources to their will. Hassan Ali's language further illustrates how his people understood themselves in relation to the land; as "overseers" or guardians.

From an early age, Hassan Ali was ambitious and exhibited a propensity for leadership that would be realized throughout his adult life. He was known to quote a

[71] Lines 1-16 of a poem by Hassan Ali, approx. 1870, transcribed by Faisal Almahamid, translated to English by the author.

famous Arab proverb: “Paradise, without people, is not worth stepping foot in.”[72] After several months of traversing the region and meeting its inhabitants, Hassan Ali sought to use his wealth to build a legacy. During one of his journeys, he encountered a cluster of abandoned stone buildings. He continued his path until he reached the top of a hill, where he discovered a crumbling structure buried in the sandy soil. With the help of his family, he uncovered a stone building with vaulted ceilings, cruciform windows, and Latin text carved on the walls. It was a Christian chapel with an adjoining courtyard, built in the fifth century when Nasib was part of the Arabia province of the Byzantine Empire.

Hassan looked to the heavens, thanking God for the bountiful land around him and for the empty chambers, or *mahmiyyat,* he had found. Later in his life, in a poem he’d recite to his son, Zaid, Hassan fondly reminisced on this moment of encounter,

> Praise be to Allah, for the mirqab I discovered,
>
> As my mind recalls all I’ve put behind me,
>
> As I recall all I loved and held dear,
>
> And what white nights they are, those that have passed me by.

[72] This is a famous Arab proverb

Fig 25. The Author at Alali, 2021, Photograph by Azmad Din.

Hassan Ali reclaimed the chapel as his family home and nicknamed the building Alali, *the heights*, for its unique position overlooking the village. At last, with the discovery of this sanctuary, he could build his paradise. He made his way through the region on horseback and along his encounters through sparsely populated villages, he invited fellahin from neighboring clans to cultivate Nasib's lands and dwell permanently in its abandoned stone buildings; among these families were Abu Zriek, Al Radhi, and Al-Sharif. As these new settlers arrived, Hassan Ali allocated the existing Byzantine houses and farmlands to each incoming family until Nasib grew into a village of around two hundred inhabitants

within ten years.[73] In the same poem, a few verses speak to his understanding of his role and position as founder:

> And oh, how we hosted them, with meat and hafiteh[74]!
>
> With mansaf[75] for them, and the one who'd betray me![76]
>
> Their families today, each in his own home,
>
> All blessing comes from Allah, and the provision came from me!

These verses also reveal Hassan Ali's understanding of land as a form of abundance from God meant to be shared with others. This process of settlement and communal living and farming was not unique to Nasib. Lewis details the phenomenon:

> The same processes which led to the sedentarization of tribesmen encouraged peasants and landlords to take new land under cultivation. Peasants emigrated, either from neighboring villages or from a distance. They might develop lands on their own account, or for a city landlord, Bedouin shaikh, or other notable under a crop-sharing agreement. Certain villages, as mentioned above, threw off many satellite settlements. The peasants of the Hauran plain gradually filled their villages.[77]

Lewis further describes this process as a type of "indigenous colonization." The dynamic of early settlement in Nasib was a different form of inhabitation, one which adopted feudal hierarchies, but manifested differently than European models of land distribution. Speaking

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[73] This is a population estimate according to Schumaker's survey.
[74] Hafiteh is an old word for Mleihi, a popular regional dish of cracked wheat cooked with yogurt and clarified butter
[75] Another word for a communal platter of rice or wheat topped with meat
[76] Here Hassan Ali is referring to a paternal cousin who would later collaborate with another clan to oust him from power.
[77] Lewis, 55

on the motivations for settlement, a European traveler Jean Louis Burckhardt observed in how in many of Hauran's villages, the fellahin would

> Find commodious habitations in the [deserted] ancient houses; a camel transports their family and baggage; and as they are not tied to any particular spot by private landed property, or plantations, and find everywhere large tracts to cultivate, they feel no repugnance at quitting the place of their birth.[78]

In the Caribbean context, Ferdinand describes *colonial inhabitation* as "a singular conception with regard to the existence of certain human beings on Earth – the colonists – of their relationships with other humans–the non-colonists–as well as their ways of relating to nature and to the non-humans…"[79] In this case, it was not the colonization of people, but the reappropriation of existing architecture and uninhabited land for cultivation.

[78] Jean Louis Burckhardt in Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics, 43
[79] Ferdinand, 27

, RUSTLING ACROSS WHEAT FIELDS AND OLIVE GROVES

How…should man have come to the idea that wheat needs to be cultivated through ploughing and sowing, being covered by soil at a certain time, then at times watered evenly so that it starts growing, and that then it should be left to itself until harvesting, then harvested, threshed and winnowed, ground and kneaded and baked? The origin of all this is with the toil of the owners of estates and the farmers and fieldworkers who labour patiently, despite severe cold or heat, through great toil and misery.[80]

- *Ibn Wahshiyya, The Nabatean Agriculture*

[80] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshiyya and His Nabatean Agriculture*. (Brill: 2006), 252

It's worth noting that within this agrarian society, the most prized asset was land. When it came to everyday necessities, people at the local scale generally operated within a trade and barter system.[81] If you had land, you had wealth, and therefore status and power. Although land was considered a valuable resource, the spatial organization of the village was fully oral; there were no marked boundaries or written contracts. These oral mapping traditions were commonplace across the larger region, not just in Hauran. For example, in the Palestinian village of Deir Ghassaneh, Suad Amiry describes how the fellahin transformed the natural landscape into a "cultural landscape"[82] describing it as,

> … a cognitive map of spatial divisions that stressed a multiplicity of differentiating criteria, each dividing the land on one basis and uniting it on another. These differentiating criteria, overlapping and constituting a complex network, were clearly established in the peasant's frame of reference: cardinal points, localities, landmarks, kinship domains, ecological domains, and seasonal agricultural cycles."[83]

Hassan Ali purchased 80 Ruba'a[84] of land, roughly equivalent to 1,344 acres. He claimed 25% of the land and distributed the remaining 75% with its Byzantine structures to new settlers based on their family-size.[85] Each family received a land lot with an historic structure, and a portion of land on the perimeters of the village for farming. However, to maintain some form of equity, villagers treated the agricultural land plots as flexible boundaries. Each year they shuffled the farmlands in a lottery, to ensure each family had

[81] Paper money wouldn't be printed and circulated in Syria until 1920, approximately seventy years after the establishment of Nasib.
[82] Amiry's book, *The Peasant Architecture of Palestine,* provides an incredibly rich and detailed history of the Fellahi village's architectural and cultural fabric.
[83] Amiry, 52-53
[84] Farmland in the region was parceled into Ruba'a, or "Quarters."
[85] Today, the village's largest families are the most established and powerful.

access to the more fertile quarters of the village. The outskirts of the village had thick vegetation where residents and Bedouins herded their flocks. Animals were a form of wealth. The majority of people raised some type of livestock, including chickens, goats, sheep, cows, and mules, while wealthier residents like Hassan Ali had horses and camels. Until the completion of the Hejaz railway, animals remained the primary means of transportation, and a key source of food and dairy goods. This spatially manifested in small stables added to people's homes.

Hassan Ali hired sharecroppers, or *murab'een,* to cultivate his lands. Sharecropping and tenancy were prevalent practices in the Islamic world, specifically during the Ottoman empire.[86] In the case of Nasib, murab'een received a quarter of the total harvest for their labor. They were permitted to construct additional structures on the land as they saw fit, and to cultivate their own gardens. Their meals and housing were provided by their landlord. They too were *fellahin,* in the sense that agriculture was their primary livelihood. However, the murab'een remained tenants, not landowners. Little is recorded about Hassan Ali's murab'een; though interviewees confirmed that he employed twelve of them.[87] It is important to acknowledge that even within non-dominant or oral histories, there are many internal hierarchies of remembrance.

[86] Sabrina Joseph delineates the shifting Islamic jurisprudence on landlord-tenant relationships, and the legality of sharecropping in "The Legal Status of Tenants and Sharecroppers in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France and Ottoman Syria," *Rural History 18*, no. 1 (04, 2007): 32

[87] This number was provided by Um Ghazi and confirmed by Ahmed Al Naser; whose father (Sheikh Nasser), was a lifelong friend of my grandfather, Faisal.

As *mukhtar,* or chief of the village, Hassan Ali mediated any conflict that would arise over farmlands. There were also forms of mutual aid; villagers paid *zakat*, an Islamic form of taxation, that Hassan Ali collected and redistributed to those in need. He stored a collective portion of the harvest in the Byzantine chambers, converting them into mahmiyyat. The wheat surplus became a form of welfare to ensure the village and its residents could survive future droughts. The same wheat also became a bargaining tool to protect Nasib from violent *ghazwat*, or raids. When raiders approached the village, Hassan Ali would greet them at its edge and invite them to his *madhafa*, or guest room in Alali, offering wheat and temporary lodging under the condition that they leave in peace.

Fig 26.
Inside Hassan Ali's Madhafa, 2003,
Photograph by Wafaa Almahamid.

Fig 27. Hassan Ali's Mahmiyyat, Nasib, 2021.

He was known as "Abu Albaidh," "Father of Eggs," because he would fry dozens of eggs for his guests in a massive pan, an unusual sight at the time.

Although the Ottoman state still formally ruled the land during this period, its authority had largely receded across the region, and territories were controlled by powerful clans and tribes. These micro spatial politics extended to broader village networks. The mukhtar corresponded regularly with leaders from neighboring villages/towns and formed alliances. Semi nomadic inhabitants of the region were more likely to settle in these villages under the protection of large, established families like the Almahamid. This phenomenon unfolded spatially in the madhafa; a busy madhafa reflected a respected leader.

Dreams, departures, and eggs. June 2023

It has been 13 years since his passing, but Jiddo Faisal has only once appeared to me in a dream, more than nine years ago. In real life, Jiddo never stepped foot in America, although my mother deeply wished he could. In the dream, I saw him walking towards us in arrivals at JFK airport, wearing an elegant suit and walking with the gait of a much younger man, sans-cane. He was grinning from ear to ear, and his hands reached out towards us, when I regretfully woke up.

My younger brother, Omar, on the other hand, has been fortunate enough to receive several dream visits from Jiddo. If there's one thing I envy about Omar, it's his affinity for dreaming about our dearly departed relatives.

Perhaps dreams are the ultimate madhafa; free from the chains of time, death, and material. How magical it is, that in the madhafa of dreams our departed grandfather can traverse time and oceans to visit us.

A few months ago, we were at mama's house reminiscing about our childhood visits to Syria and exchanging stories about Jiddo and Hassan Ali. When I shared the "Father of Eggs" story with Omar, he gaped at me in disbelief.

"I had the weirdest dream about Jiddo Faisal years ago that I could never explain. In the dream I saw him walking around our backyard in New York, gathering dozens and dozens of eggs. When I asked him why, he said he was collecting them to feed to people."

For a moment, we both sat in silence, dumbstruck by this revelation. How eerie it was, that unbeknownst to Omar, he had reconnected with a long-lost ancestral tradition in his sleep. Whether this was by strange coincidence, or supernatural intervention remains to be seen.

Diasporic memory is a peculiar thing indeed. It feels as if we are doomed to inherit the world of our ancestors, and with it, a sea of their memories that lives within us. Even in new lands where we speak in foreign tongues, we are still haunted by these dreams that whisper: half of you is always elsewhere.

, WHISPERED TO THE BRICKS OF OUR HOUSES

...building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling -
to build is in itself already to dwell.[88]

-Martin Heidegger

Fig 28. Encounters with Cut Bluestone, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

[88] Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” from Poetry, Language, Thought, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1971,

When Hassan Ali arrived in Nasib that fateful day almost two centuries years ago, only two structures were fully standing and ready to inhabit: the chapel and a structure above we call “iliyya,” with a stone staircase. The complex was fully enclosed with stone fortress walls that had a gate from each direction: North, South, East and West. According to local lore, in its completion Hassan Ali’s built estate had 27 arches. In the early stages of restoration, upon noticing that the arch under the ‘iliya was weakened, he disassembled the stair and the upper level and used its stones to build a small, elevated platform in the courtyard, which he filled in with the soil that had accumulated around the chapel.

Surrounding the chapel were several bluestone houses in various states of decay. The new residents started to fix up and inhabit the houses around the Alali; it was the beginning of forming neighborhoods. They used the found stones of the collapsed structures to build arches, doorways, and windows. If they found themselves in need of more stones, they would travel to Umm-El Jimal[89] or the neighboring village of Jabir on their camels and donkeys.

Each caravan would carry two or three stones, depending on their ability. If a neighbor didn’t have a mule of his own, he would borrow his neighbor’s. In the wintertime, when work in the fields was scarce, owners could spare their plow animals for a few days. This also relieved them from the burden of feeding the animal for that given time, as the borrower became responsible for its food. Thus, small groups, sometimes only two men would make these journeys to retrieve the stones, which were already pre-cut and carved. This system of building continued for several decades. This local narrative of material

[89] about 20 km from Nasib.

sourcing and adaptive reuse is in stark contrast to the overarching and persistent European narrative which frames this behavior as “looting.” It is certainly a nightmare to the western preservationist and a major obstacle in his path to restore a building to its “original” state according to the Hellenistic manual.

With time, as the village grew and more craftsmen moved in, the practice of transporting bluestones died out, and residents began to build with white calcite sourced directly from Nasib’s local quarry. The same white stone was the material of choice in late Ottoman structures across Daraa. In addition to being more readily available, the white stone was lighter and softer, making it less labor intensive to cut than the basaltic stone. The *Hajjaar*, or stone mason could cut about 15-20 stones per day and immediately begin construction.

Slow practices could no longer accommodate Nasib’s rapid population growth. Similarly, emerging European ideas of modernity were often at odds with local values of maintenance and tending. With time, European conceptions of prestige would stigmatize the use of traditional materials. This practice of transporting stones has been historically framed as a challenge of institutional preservation work in the region. However, the fellahin’s adaptive and more pragmatic reuse of the buildings reveals the potential multiplicity of restoration practice. It’s important to note that despite his Islamic faith, Hassan Ali at no point felt compelled to erase or dismantle Alali’s Christian formal elements. It is touching and deeply nuanced; the image of Hassan Ali, praying under the dim light of the cruciform window. As Miriam Brusius reveals, speaking on preservation in the SWANA region, historic objects and places of cultural significance were “activated

multiple times, and thus various 'antiquities' of different times coexisted; often in tandem with the material culture of Islam.[90]

This phenomenon can also be observed in other geographies. Veysel Apaydin explores how communities in Turkey similarly created their own architectural heritage by dismantling and reusing monuments, describing it as "community-led destruction and construction…in direct contrast to top-down destruction led by hegemonic powers."[91] Apaydin further argues that the adaptive reuse of heritage— or what I'd argue is experimental, embodied preservation—"can be part of memory accumulation and continuity."[92] Similarly, in the case of Laos, Karlström explores how the local understanding of restoration privileged returning the structure's "prestige and spiritual values," in contrast to institutional discourse which privileges "*form and fabric and material authenticity*."[93] These conflicting understandings of heritage often culminated in the colonial displacement of native groups from historic places.

Take for example one of Syria's most famous and contested monumental sites: Palmyra. Shaw unpacks its lesser-known history, revealing how the local population of Palmyra preserved and understood the site "not through a relationship to the past in narrative, ruins, or objects," but in relation to the geographic features of the land like its

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[90] Mirjam Brusius, "Introduction—What is Preservation?" Review of Middle East Studies , Vol. 51, No. 2 (AUGUST 2017), pp. 177-182,179

[91] Veysel Apaydin, "The Interlinkage of Cultural Memory, Heritage and Discourses of Construction, Transformation and Destruction," *in Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage,* 22-23

[92] Veysel Apaydin, "The Interlinkage of Cultural Memory, Heritage and Discourses of Construction, Transformation and Destruction," *in Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage,* 26

[93] Anna Karlström, "Local Heritage and the Problem with Conservation," in Transcending the Culture-Nature Divide in Cultural Heritage, 147

ancient water source. In contrast, incoming Europeans framed the original inhabitants as "interlopers on territories already defined through historical narrative."[94] Shaw further critiques the harmful impact these hierarchies of remembrance have on sites of embodied preservation that carry lots of meaning for the communities that inhabit them but are dismissed by the institution. As Karlström reveals, "adding, removing and elaborating over time are necessary parts of the merit-making act…It is the (more or less constant) act of restoration that is important, rather than the result of it, after its completion."[95]

[94] Wendy Shaw, 157
[95] Anna Karlström, "Local Heritage and the Problem with Conservation," in *Transcending the Culture-Nature Divide in Cultural Heritage,* 146

At every turn, a Kharaba, April 2024

The sky was overcast and six of us were packed into a tiny sedan, en route to Nasib from Damascus. As we passed the familiar sites along the autostrade, I noticed a strange monument. At first, with its austere concrete frame pierced by bullets and left gaping from explosions, I mistook it for a military encampment. However, a massive mound of boulder fragments with sharp edges said otherwise.

"Stop the car! What's that over there?"
My uncle explained that it was once a stone cutting factory, occupied during the height of warfare, and later stripped of its wiring and parts. These stations which were once abundant along the route are now just material relics.

Like so many deserted sites, had it not been for the visibly rusty machinery and coat of soil and patina, the place felt as if it had been abandoned yesterday. There were still pieces of stone on the tables, waiting to be cut. At every turn was a Kharaba, a *ruin* or *destroyed site.*

Fig 29. A Rusting Boulder Lift, Hauran, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

My uncle runs his palm along the smooth surface of a cut boulder, turns the rusted blade of a circular saw, and it's as if I hear a cassette tape rewinding.

The craftsmen who once cut bluestone left the country, and those whose grandparents built stone houses sold the stones for pennies to survive.

The machines that once unlocked the sounds of the stone are rusting along highways. I am confronted with the realization that all our tools are broken. Not only the tools of remembering, but the tools of building.

Fig 30. A Stone Cutting Tool Stripped of its Parts, Hauran, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

Fig 31. Spinning the Blade of an Abandoned Saw, Hauran, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

, PASSED LOVINGLY FROM PARENT TO CHILD

…My son lays down his pens, his crayon box in front of me
and asks me to draw a homeland for him.
The brush trembles in my hands.
and I sink, weeping.

-Nizar Qabbani, “A Lesson in Drawing.”

In many ways these traditional preservation practices in Nasib would slowly dissipate with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the impending French Mandate of Syria. In the village and across the country, the French state appointed its own local leaders, or *zu'amaa,* who in exchange for modest salaries, served as intelligence officials and quelled rebellion in their villages from within. Effectively stripped of his leadership, Hassan Ali spent his final years broken-hearted, staring out at his increasingly empty madhafa, lamenting to his son,

> Oh Zaid, where are the saplings of seeds I sowed?
>
> I never saw gratitude despite their abundance
>
> Oh Zaid, never did I plant something and harvest it,
>
> My own land turned dry beneath me[96]

Here the "seeds" refer not to plants, but to people. Hassan Ali is not mourning an agricultural loss, but instead the dissolution of a community that he felt he had cultivated. Although his elder son, Mohammad Saeed, inherited the cultural role of mukhtar to

[96] Lines 16-20 of a poem by Hassan Ali, transcribed in Arabic by Safaa Almahamid, translated to English by the Author. Estimated date: 1910-1915.

preserve the tradition, it feels to many elders in Nasib today that a distinct era of abundance died with Hassan Ali's generation.

After Hassan Ali's death, Alali and his farmlands were subdivided and inherited by his six children. The remaining lands which informally belonged to him were claimed by new settlers and neatly divided into lots, and sealed in stone around the 1980s when the government conducted a formal survey and built infrastructure in the village.[97] Through the privatization of land, sites became increasingly fragmented. So much of Alali's current condition illustrates this phenomenon. What becomes of a space divided between my mother and her nine siblings, to be eventually passed down to twelve grandchildren and so on and so forth. One stakeholder cannot act without the approval of the remaining heirs; and this doesn't consider the gender dynamics at play.

[97] According to Daraa's building department

Fig 32. Hands Gesture on a Survey Plate, *Echoes from the Stone*, Nasib, 2024, Film Still.
Fig 33. Plans Stacked at The Building Department, *Echoes from the Stone*, Nasib, 2024, Film Still.

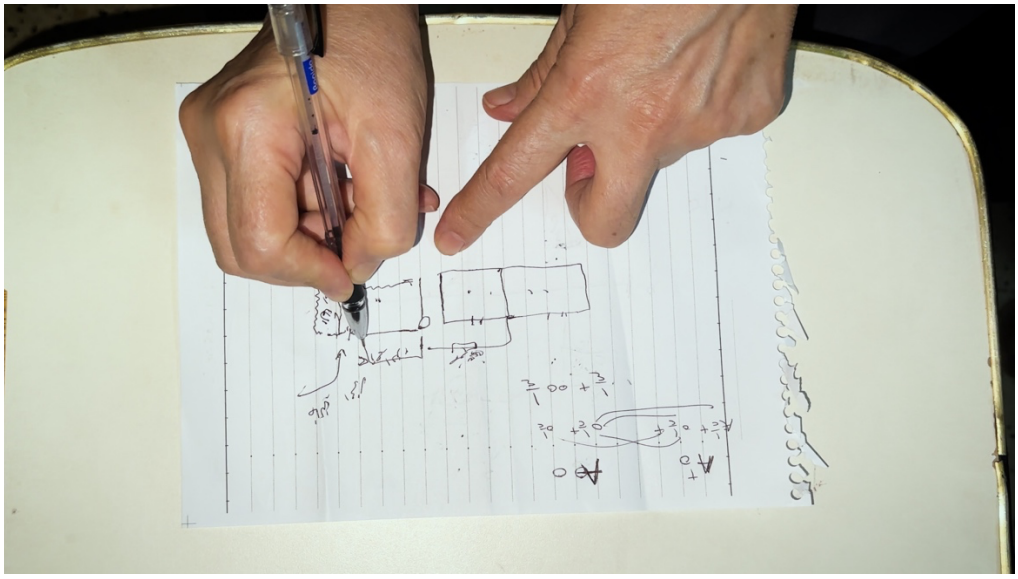

Fig 34. Aunt Enam's Site Map from Memory, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, Film Still.

Burial sites, March 2023

"Rumor has it there's a Roman burial site under Yusuf Nahar's old house," my aunt whispered, her eyes glowing by the battery-powered LED light (we were in her apartment in Damascus and the electricity had cut out).

After instructing me to retrieve scrap paper from a hidden compartment in the couch, she sketched maps of the old village from memory, tracing the tunnels that ran under Nasib's streets.

"Most of Nahar's descendants left the country during the war; now only one of his eight children remains in Nasib."

With each passing year, their old house, like ours, seems to fall further into disrepair. Its position on a street corner and lower elevation has made it the neighborhood's landfill. Every type of rubbish imaginable is dumped there; I learned this the unfortunate way after stepping into a heavily soiled diaper…

As my aunt traced the buried routes and their doorways, I wondered what mythical universes live under the rubble, and what stories were swallowed up by the soil.

Fig 35. Ruins of Dar Yusuf Nahar, Nasib, 2021.

According to the sharia law of inheritance, a son inherits double the daughter ‘s inheritance. In a family with two children, this is straightforward enough. However, it becomes increasingly complicated the larger the family gets. Imagine the painstaking math required to apply the law in a family of seven daughters and three sons. This is further complicated when non-religious family members seek to distribute the inheritance according to secular Syrian inheritance law while others prefer to follow the sharia. Still, the law can only govern so much; culturally it remains commonplace for men to claim their sisters’ property as their own. Although legally women have property rights, in practice their affairs are often left to the whim of a husband, brother, or father.

Thus, given the cultural context, it was a rather unconventional move for my grandfather Faisal to leave Alali to my grandmother. She walks a tightrope between her children who all have vested interest in the site, knowing that regardless of her decisions, her sons could object and claim Alali as their own. Thankfully, there is a general spirit of collectivity and collaboration within my family that has thus far prevented serious disputes over land; however, this doesn't mean there is an absence of gender-based tensions. This is further complicated by the fact that most stakeholders no longer live in Syria.

Development and the construction of infrastructure deeply impacted Nasib's landscape; much of the brush on the outskirts of the village was razed for development towards the 1970s. While advancements like electric and water infrastructure and roads improved many people's quality of life, they also impeded a different kind of progress and undermined important community structures. Just two generations after Hassan Ali, the tradition of raising livestock began to die out. Overhunting around the village led to the extinction of local deer, rabbit, and avian populations. Similarly, expansion and development reduced public green space for animals to graze. No longer able to sustain their nomadic way of life, Bedouin communities began to settle in Hauran's villages as tenants or landowners, and the process of raising livestock became more commercialized. Today, many people in the village buy their meat and dairy goods from the Bedouin community.

Existential crisis on a Thursday January **2024**

"You left your homeland… are you happy this way?"

The heavy question, earnestly posed by Jidda's friend and neighbor, Sabha Al Jabr – was like a gut punch that stopped me in my tracks.

Mama and Jidda had errands to run that day, so neither could accompany me on my visit with her. Although I was looking forward to the conversation, I was far less confident initiating on my own, as an introvert and especially as a stranger to many of Nasib's elders. Jidda, the social butterfly could always break the ice and most often, I would sit back and take notes while they chattered.

This time, to my chagrin, Jidda dropped me off at Aunt Sabha's door, like she was dropping off her preschooler to daycare.

"Sabha, this is my granddaughter visiting from America, she wants to ask you questions for her school project!" she yelled.

I could feel my face burn.

"Of course, of course, Um Ghazi, but oh please you must come in, too!"
"No, no habibti, wallah you are so generous. I'm so sorry we have work today."
"Come back!"
"Yes, yes inshallah another time, my granddaughter will stay with you!"

We exchanged pleasantries then sat awkwardly for a few minutes while I set up my gear until she finally asked,

"So, what is it that you wanted to discuss, child?"

I asked her about her childhood. She told me about the old houses, about growing up in the village in a time where, *we had so little in the way of material things, but life felt so abundant. Not like now. Some people building mansions while others don't know where their next meal will come from.*

She described the horror of experiencing the rocket strike, how at one point the living room window collapsed on her back.

Despite her many grievances, nearly every other sentence she raised her hands and uttered, *Alhamdulillah- All praise is due to Allah, God help our poor brethren in Gaza, god bless you and your family, god help the poor and oppressed everywhere.*

As she grew more comfortable, I quickly became the subject of the interview. Was I married? Did I have kids? What did I do for a living? Finally,

So I guess you have acclimated to America then. You left your homeland. Is this what you imagined? Are you happier this way?

Could I tell her I was a woman consumed by this question? That it felt like I was drowning? That I was haunted by memories that weren't even my own?

How could I explain that I can't sit mindlessly on the subway without a visceral vision of my young mother as an immigrant student. That I imagine her miles away from her family and everything she ever knew, riding the Paris metro, hoping she made the right decision. How her ghost sits beside me on every train ride, accompanies me on walks through Tompkins Park, and stares back at me from across cafe tables.

And when I listen to Nizar Qabbani exclaim,

I am the Damascene! If you cut open my chest, apples and grapes would spill forth,

And if you sliced my artery with a scalpel, out would seep the voices of those who passed on!

With each verse I wonder what then would spill from *my* chest: a disjointed collection of baubles and photographs?

After racking my brain for a string of coherent Arabic words that could express what I was feeling, all I could muster was, "al ghorba sa'ba, khala." "foreign-ness is difficult, auntie."

"You poor dear," she sighed, nodding sympathetically.

We said our goodbyes and I packed up my equipment.

As I walked through the old neighborhood, a child pointed and muttered to his friend, "that lady has a gun!"

Concerned, I looked around only to realize I was the lady in question— except my weapon was a tripod.

Wielding a camera in Nasib, I am both constantly confronted with and afraid of my foreign-ness. Afraid that on some level, I am no different than the Gottlieb Schumachers and Gertrude Bells that wandered here before.

, CARRIED ACROSS OCEANS AND BORDERS

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.[98]
- Choman Hardi, "At The Border."

[98] Choman Hardi, "At the Border," 1979.

My Jiddo Faisal was born in Nasib in 1918, at the onset of the French occupation. He was named for Emir Faisal I of Iraq, who entered Syria that year, and whose pan-Arab vision garnered widespread support amongst the Bedouins and rural dwellers of the region. However, the Faisal experiment lasted only two years before he was ousted by the same European states which had promised him the land. Before the turn of the century, the French government went to great lengths to cultivate its image in the region as a benevolent mentor. The European power was one of the largest investors in Ottoman infrastructure prior to the First World War and held a majority stake in the Ottoman Public Debt.[99]

This dynamic unfolded on the land as villagers across Hauran bore witness to the construction of the Hejaz railway; a massive undertaking envisioned to provide Hajj pilgrims a direct route from Damascus to Medina. As William Shorrock reveals, "The object was to increase French popularity in the area by making Syrians and Lebanese believe that France was spearheading a drive to achieve political and administrative autonomy for them within the Ottoman Empire."[100] In many ways, the French civilizing mission in Syria was framed as a project of tutelage and management.[101] This laid the groundwork for the French invasion and secured their ambitions for military recruitment. Haurani recruits to the French army were often impoverished fellahin who joined for the

[99] Daniel Neep, Occupying Syria Under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation, (Cambridge Middle East Studies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26
[100] William I. Shorrock, "The Origin of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon: The Railroad Question, 1901- 1914," International Journal of Middle East Studies 1, no. 2 (1970): 135.
[101] Idir Ouahes, "French Mandate Syria and Lebanon: Land, Ecological Interventions, and the 'Modern' State," In Environments of Empire: Networks and Agents of Ecological Change, edited by Ulrike Kirchberger and Brett M. Bennett, (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 77

economic incentives.[102] During the mandate period, a significant portion of Nasib's young men were recruited for the army. Um Ghazi notes that during the early French invasion, men of her father's generation in Nasib who couldn't work served in the French Army, for a salary of 16 Francs.[103] This was not the case for more affluent landlords and urban townspeople. The French presence in Syria was largely perceived as illegitimate by urban bureaucrats, unlike the Ottoman presence.[104] Affluent landowners in Hauran echoed this sentiment, not because they were particularly fond of the Ottomans, but because they refused to ally themselves with the foreign occupying force that had ousted King Faisal.[105]

This era was also marked by an influx of visiting *kutaaba*, or religious scholars who taught young men in the village how to read and write. This led to a wave of migration to cities for further education since there were no formal schools in Nasib. In Jiddo's early life, locals navigated Greater Syria freely. Young men in Nasib would venture out to work as laborers in the nearest port cities like Beirut and Jaffa. Haifa, Palestine was a walkable trip, and my grandfather traveled there often to load cargo in exchange for British mandate coins.

In 1931, the League of Nations gathered in Paris to formally renegotiate the division of Levantine territory into states. The negotiations, which lasted for several weeks, were a culmination of the detailed surveys and decades-long intervention in the region and encompassed a series of territorial concessions on both sides.

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[102] N. E. Bou-Nacklie, "Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916-46," International Journal of Middle East Studies 25, no. 4 (1993): 649.
[103] Um Ghazi, In Conversation with the Author, December 2022
[104] Philip Shukry Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945, (Princeton University Press, 1987), 198.
[105] Khoury, 198.

These minor tensions between Great Britain and France can be physically traced in the records. An archival sketch map visualizes a portion of these conflicting boundary lines, which intersect at Nasib.

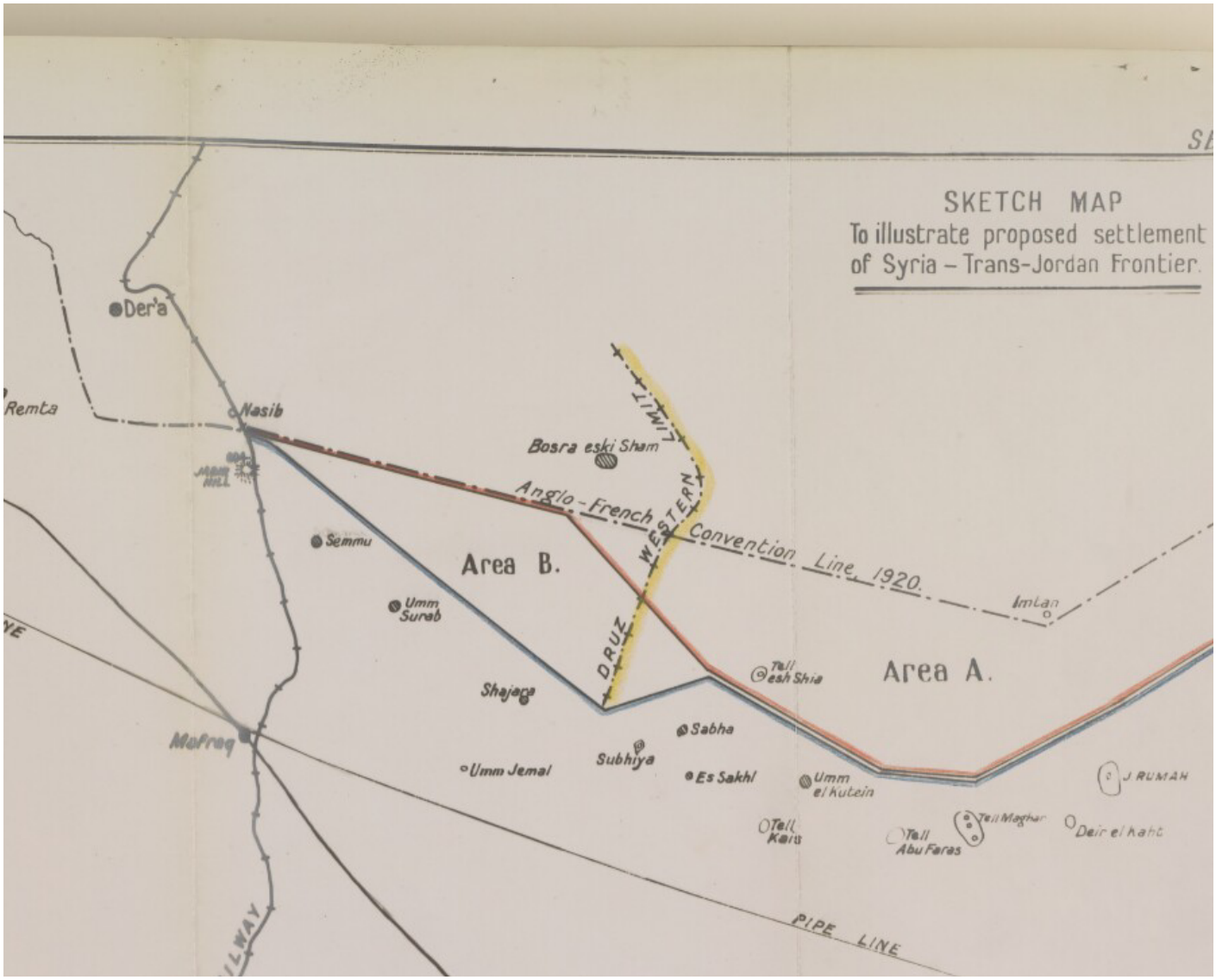

Fig 36. SKETCH MAP To illustrate proposed settlement of Syria - Trans-Jordan Frontier, 1931, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers. Qatar Digital Library.

Thus the village was immortalized in these debates surrounding the looming paradigm shift. Nasib's impending fate was finally sealed in a short clause of the Franco-British Protocol:

> From the latter cairn the frontier runs to the cairn situated approximately 1,500 metres the south of the farm of Rahaya; thence, it passes to the cairn of Kabr Hamdan, and continues towards the cairn situated at Kerkur Sud, and thence rejoins the railway at a point situated between the Syrian village of Nasib and the TransJordan village of Jabir, in such way as to leave to each of these villages the lands which belong to them.[106]

The weight of these written records still lingers today, over a century later, as their legacy has irrevocably shaped the political economy of the village. The process of drawing the borders was a means of reorienting the land through the gaze and position of the occupier. In these sketches, Nasib became liminal, on the margin, at the edge of Syria.

However, the borders throughout most of the Mandate period existed conceptually on these maps, not as a physical barrier on the ground. As the French position became increasingly tumultuous, and Arab rebellions ensued, the state increased its control at the borders and began to establish checkpoints. My grandfather recalled his first encounter with the state as a young adult. Around this time, men from Nasib who couldn't find work discovered an avenue that had retroactively become "smuggling". Young laborers would purchase two tanks of kerosene from Jordan, sling one on each side of their donkey, and bring them back to the Syrian village. A tank held roughly 20 liters of kerosene. The

[106] Amadouny, 548

smugglers would take two to three liters, which would light their family's lamps for the winter, then make a living by selling the rest.

Once when Jiddo returned to Syria, carrying two tanks of kerosene, he was stopped at a new checkpoint near Ar-Ramtha. There, he was held in a jail cell and interrogated for smuggling goods without a permit. He vividly described a tall commanding officer who passed through and assessed the young men. After a desperate attempt on Jiddo's part to make his case via sign language, the officer evidently decided the matter didn't merit escalation. With a smile he waved his hands dismissively, exclaimed, "Allez, allez," and set them free. According to my grandfather, this officer was the colonel Charles De Gaulle, before he ascended the ranks and eventually became president of the French Republic. Local rumors had it that De Gaulle was stationed in Muzayrib at the time. It is almost fantastical; the thought of my grandfather, named after a king who symbolized the great Pan-Arab dream, coming face-to-face with De Gaulle, who would later become the face of the occupying state.

To Damascus, via Beirut. August 2021

On a scorching August afternoon, we arrived at Rafik Hariri Airport with our hefty luggage, full of American goodies like chocolate, coats, sneakers, and cosmetics. It was my first time in Lebanon; in my childhood, we used to fly directly to Damascus airport. The journey from Beirut to Damascus on land required two expert taxi drivers; one Lebanese and one Syrian, both of whom managed a highly choreographed route through the abundant military checkpoints.

After standing in line at customs (akin to standing in a sauna) for two hours, the young officer scowled when we handed him our blue passports.

"You're Syrians?" He barked, after reading mama's birthplace.
"Yes, but this is an American passport." Mama calmly responded.
"I'm going to need your Syrian ID please."
Mama and I exchanged a look.
"Why?"
"Syria won't let you in without an ID."
"…but were not asking you to grant us entry into Syria, this is Lebanon."
"They're just going to give you a hard time!"
"But what's it to you?" As Mama grew increasingly frustrated, he doubled down."I'm going to need the IDs"
"But we don't have any!"
My heart started racing. Had we crossed an entire ocean only for our journey to be cut short by a cranky, underpaid Lebanese man in a vest?

I couldn't help but recall Syrian comedian Duraid Lahham in that corny film where he loses his passport and becomes nationless, unable to cross the border onwards, unable to return home. Mama and the officer went back and forth, while I crossed my arms and tried to look intimidating. Eventually, a head officer came over, asked
"what's the problem here?"
And suddenly the entry stamp started miraculously working.

We stepped through the airport doors and for the first time in sixteen years, it smelled like Syria. It had been so long since I last saw a palm tree. In an impressive stunt, the Lebanese driver managed to fit our cumbersome luggage into the trunk of a tiny sedan. As he drove through Beirut's hilly concrete peripheries, all the while I pictured young Jiddo traversing a similar route. I think about how today, my family members who live just two hours away are not allowed to visit Beirut.

A few long lines, checkpoints, and passport stamps later, we left Lebanon behind. I asked the driver whether we had entered Syria. No, this is unclaimed territory, a buffer zone. As we approached home, I wonder who, or what inhabited this no man's land.

Jiddo's entanglement at Ar-Ramtha was only the beginning of a long, ongoing encounter with borders. Because the interfacing territories are sparsely populated, the Transjordan-Syria boundary was considered a "boundary of separation," as opposed to a "boundary of contact" common to heavily populated areas.[107] This meant that locals retained their ability to cross the borders freely, at least in the first half of the 20th century. As my aunt recounted,

> Even after the French Occupation, the local way of life and mobility in our lands remained. We didn't believe in borders. A young man from the Jordanian village of Jabir would propose marriage to a young lady from Nasib. They'd have a wedding, put her on a donkey, send her to him, and say, 'Salaam Alaikum.' These divisions were not on the ground. They were on maps. The State put a "king" here or "president" there, but that didn't trickle down into local systems of politics until much later. Even in my young adulthood, we crossed the Jordanian boundary without any documents.[108]

However, in many ways, the French Mandate paved the way for a "transition to 'banal' nationalism,"[109] a gradual political process that unfolded in the latter half of the 20th century, through which internal Syrian political actors progressively internalized the borders and began to enforce them. This was a global phenomenon; "In contexts where European powers could not assert their authority directly, they pressured 'native' polities to adopt Westphalian state forms, specifically through the construction of borders."[110] As Altug

[107] Amadouny, 543
[108] Enam Almahamid, In conversation with the Author, November 2022.
[109] Cimino, 11
[110] Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins, Fragments of the Afghan Frontier, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 24

illustrates, "the making of borders is…a process constantly in-making."[111] Therefore local Syrian stakeholders, who in their everyday lives navigate and renegotiate their territory all while confronting the colonial border, become a critical source to understanding the nature of the borderland; a place in constant flux. Altug further argues, "the organization of space cannot be simply understood as solely sustained by the Turkish or French state classifications, surveillance, and procedures of administration alone. Various local actors on both sides of the border having economic, political, or social motivations contributed to its organization, too."[112] The European colonial project in the region; from its early scholarship and cartography to its execution, and finally its seeming dissolution would only foreshadow a long trajectory of imperialist agenda and brutal occupation to come.

In the events leading up to the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, Um Saado[113] recalls that officers went door to door in her village, warning residents to evacuate east. When whispers spread of al-Quneitra's destruction, people began to flee in swarms. It is estimated that 131,000 Syrian residents were expelled from the region when the occupation forces invaded.[114] Um Saado's husband, Abu Saado, had been visiting relatives north of Nasib. Stranded on her own, she packed up their belongings and two children on donkeys and ventured out in the night with her flock.

After a tumultuous journey, she arrived in the area north of Wadi al Zaa'tar, which was historically Nasib's main valley and water source. She noted that after the journey,

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[111] Seda Altug, "The Turkish-Syrian Border and Politics of Difference in Turkey and Syria," in Cimino, Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State, 47
[112] Altug, 48
[113] Um Saado, was born around 1933 and raised in the fertile plains of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.
[114] NGO Report, AL-MARSAD - The Arab Centre for Human Rights in the Golan Height, 01/25/2007, 3

officers sought to register the family as refugees, which they refused. In the larger nomadic communities of Syria there was a general distrust of the government and fear of surveillance or subjugation in the future. During their first year in Nasib, Um Saado's family lived on their relative's land, and their house was a traditional tent, or *Beit Sha'ar* that Um Saado wove together. In Arabic this translates to "house of hair," because these tents were traditionally made of wool or goat hide. In addition to being light, versatile, durable, and portable, the beit sha'ar protects its residents from harsh winter wind and summer sun.

Fig 37. Dar Abu Saado's Beit Sha'ar, Photograph by Hajar Alrifai, 2021

Um Saado later struck up a friendship with Um Ghazi's mother, who proposed that the family move into Alali as tenants. The old house was empty most of the year since my grandparents had resettled in Damascus. Um Saado's family moved into Alali in 1971, or as she put it, "the year after "Abdel Nasser passed."[115] Its sizable courtyard and central location in the village made it a suitable home for Dar Abu Saado and their flocks. The family lived there for 18 years and built their own additions to the site using stone and *Libn*, or mudbrick. Around 2021, these temporal structures were demolished by Alali's current neighbor when he built an addition to his home.

Fig 38. Earth Structures at Dar Abu Saado, Nasib, 2023.

[115] referring to Gamal Abdel Nasser, then president of Egypt who attempted to unite the two countries in a single Arab republic.

Fig 39. Jiddo walks through Alali's Temporal Structures with a surveyor, 2001, Photograph by Wafaa Almahamid.

These versatile structures served as stables, storage, and cultivation spaces, growing organically with the flock. When Alali could no longer accommodate Dar Abu Saado's growing family, the family purchased a larger plot of land on the outskirts of the village, on which they've resided for the last 35 years. They now also plant crops to supplement their income. This slow sedentarization of the Bedouin community was facilitated by the same post-colonial shifts that would manifest in the land and the architecture.

REBORN FROM THE ASHES OF MEMORY

Pour me a glass and let's drink on the ruins,
and speak of me as long as the tears are running[116]*.*

-Umm Kulthum, "Al Atlal"

[116] Adapted from the poem, 'The Ruins," by Ibrahim Nagi, composed by Riad Al Soumbaty, 1960s.

Fig 40. The Arm of the Bulldozer Overtaken by Nettle, Echoes from the Stone, 2024.

I arrived at a lookout...covered in Nettle.
January 11th, 2024

Before this trip, Mama and I had committed ourselves to breaking ground on the preservation project; clearing out the rubble and restoring the courtyard to its original condition. To my dismay, the weather had an entirely different plan; it rained nonstop. The piles of dirt and rubble which we had planned to clear out were now a treacherous sea of clay and mud. I decided to cut my losses (not without mourning the non-refundable steel-toed boots I bought specifically for the project) and focus on filming. After an entirely unproductive week I finally arrived at Alali, lugging my heavy backpack and wearing the wrong shoes, only to realize I had forgotten my keys. One of the steel bars was ripped from the entry gate, leaving a gap just wide enough for a child (or a thin teenager) to squeeze through. In the entryway lay a makeshift fire pit, assembled with a few CMU blocks and sprinkled with cigarette butts. The house had clearly become a rendezvous spot for young people in the neighborhood. Unable to squeeze through the narrow bars, I decided to take the long route across the neighbor's property to find another point of entry.

The site was completely engulfed with bushes and greenery, rendering the red soil invisible. The further I trekked into the brush, the more vividly I recalled childhood horror stories of snakes and scorpions lurking within. Inhale. Exhale. Just pretend the floor is lava. I clumsily tiptoed through the mass of mud and leaves onto scattered bluestone, when suddenly a sharp pain shot through my hand. My fingers had lightly brushed against the thorny leaves and were now covered in welts. Maybe the universe was giving me signs to retreat while I had the chance...

In the general absence of institutional regulation in the village, Nasib's residents acted as the stewards of their cultural patrimony. Mama recalls sleeping in the dark chambers of Alali, under the dim light of oil lamps before electricity reached Nasib. She has fond memories of growing up with Um Saado's children; stories of how they ran and played together on Alali's rooftops; how she watched Um Saado churning butter in the courtyard. She spent her childhood plastering cracks in the roof with Jidda, using a local adobe made of mud and fermented hay. The houses were also coated annually in a process called *tatreesh*, or splashing, with a lime mixture, giving them a distinct whitewashed appearance. This also protected the homes from insects and other pests. Similarly, the organic *kisara*, or mortar between the stones was removed and replaced annually to prevent rotting or mold.

Fig 41. Family members Gathered Inside Alali,
Photograph by Wafaa Almahamid, 2001.

These rituals of tending illustrate a different understanding of permanence and durability. This local value system prioritized shared labor, care, slow growth, adaptive reuse, intergenerational and communal responsibility; all in contrast to colonial ideals of individualism, productivity, and efficiency. Because the process of building with earth, reed, and stone was affordable and the material was readily available within the village and its immediate outskirts, Nasib maintained this distinct architectural language for decades. Aided by these local preservation practices, the historic buildings in Nasib persisted. These traditions of care and tending continued until the mid-20th century, when the establishment of the nation-state, industrialization and the introduction of reinforced concrete slowly wiped-out the local material culture. The gradual decay of the historic houses and the shift to concrete construction eliminated communal building practices such as producing mud brick and transporting and building with dry stone—all of which relied on a deep sense of community and mutual aid.

As new materials made their way into the market, the wealth disparities—which were mediated by shared spaces and the uniformity of the architectural material—became instantly recognizable in the new building facades along Nasib's streets. As Apaydin suggests, "communities hold and share cultural values through material culture and heritage. These are also used for developing and consolidating memory, a sense of

belonging and the construction of identity."[117] Within a decade, centuries-old intergenerational building practices were nearly wiped out.

Fig 42. Alali's Crumbling Roof, Nasib, 2021.

Later, in the process of building national infrastructure and establishing centralized rule, the local government also took a bulldozer to the existing local heritage. For example, in 1990, the building department announced its plans to build two six-meter roads, one of which would run directly through Alali's site. Fearing the chapel would be torn down, my

[117] Veysel Apaydin, "The Interlinkage of Cultural Memory, Heritage and Discourses of Construction, Transformation and Destruction," *in Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage,* 15

grandfather submitted an appeal demanding a cease of the demolition orders. Despite his efforts, the government constructed an east-west road that destroyed the courtyard and historic doorway to the church. The road's construction powerfully illustrates the government's lack of care regarding historic sites in remote places like Nasib, which neither boast UNESCO designations nor attract tourism. As the *azma* progressed, it became difficult for residents to justify the labor of preserving empty historic buildings that could be razed to the ground at any given moment. Around 2019, in the wake of the brutal US-imposed Caesar Act, people across Hauran began to excavate the deserted Byzantine sites in the hope of uncovering artifacts.

Fig 43. View from the New Construction, Echoes from the Stone, 2024, film still

Fig 44. Wild Grass Sprouts from Wartime Trenches, Nasib, 2021.

...Suddenly, I heard a chorus of children's laughter. With a thump, a little girl slid out of the neighbor's bluestone chamber and plopped right into the thorny bush. Her hair was a mass of unruly brown curls, her face smudged with dirt, and a pair of worn-out flip flops clung to her feet for dear life. Seeming completely unperturbed by her barefoot dismount onto the stinging plant, she jumped up, dusted herself off, and made her way back.

"Wait, how did you get in there?" I called. Two more children suddenly appeared, a slightly older girl and boy. The boy gaped at me, and after noticing my filming equipment and weathered jacket, raised a concerned brow.
"What are you guys doing here?" I asked.
"We play here all the time!" he explained, his hands on his hips. The girls stood behind him and gaped at me.
"Can you guys show me how you got in?" Realizing I wasn't there to break up their party, he eyed the other children and they exchanged a grin.
"Follow us!" he said. We hiked through the mass of nettle towards the chambers. The accumulation of soil had left a narrow opening where the eastern doorway used to be. One by one, the children disappeared through the opening, and I followed (but not before I forgot to remove my backpack and got awkwardly lodged in the doorway, to the children's delight). Inside we found three more children playing.

"I am the brave knight!" a boy shouted, waving a stick in the air, and chasing the other kids with it. I whipped out my camera to capture the moment which only summoned more children, some of whom had spotted me walking through the neighborhood days prior.
"Through this gate here is Dar Faisal, Faisal's house!"
I couldn't help but feel amused at this group of neighborhood kids kindly informing me that this was my deceased grandfather's house; though to be fair, I was clearly the outsider in this scenario. We descended into Alali's courtyard, where yet more kids were playing.

"Why are you filming this place?"
"This is my family's house, I'm writing a thesis about it. I'm Faisal's granddaughter," I explained.
They seemed awestruck by this; to them, Faisal was some distant figure in a local fable and this land an ancient ruin...

ECHOING FROM THE STONES OF OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Searching for my home that is there,
For my homeland that is sieged with wires,
Searching for my childhood,
And for my neighborhood companion,
For my books, my photographs,
For every warm corner, and for every vase.

-Nizar Qabbani, "One Road."

In 2019, my uncle saw the vacant part of Alali's site as an opportunity to earn income during the crisis. He constructed a two-story commercial building designed by my aunt Wafaa, a practicing architect. Called "Faisal Center," this addition was intended to be a community center and event hall; Wafaa envisioned its material to match the Byzantine facades. Due to the scarcity of specialized craftsmen, a painfully foreign concrete mammoth was erected instead, a grim symbol of the tense battle between past and present. This conflict peaked in 2019 when, during construction of the new addition, the chapel was bulldozed and destroyed. In only a few short seconds, a building that stood for 1,500 years was pulverized by the mechanized leviathan.

Fig 45. Architectural Rendering of Faisal Center, Wafaa Almahamid, 2019.

Fig 46. The New Addition, As Built, 2024.

Around this time, eager to embrace modernity and its lush amenities, several landowners demolished their historic homes in the village. As we become hostages to air conditioning, properly sealed homes, and extra space for growing families, old buildings no longer suffice. Still, the reality of losing what is not only a historic site, but a former family home laden with the memories of four generations is unsettling.

My aunt fondly remembers her childhood in the 1980s at Alali:

> We laughed and chased each other under the arches and scrambled across the roof, scaling the narrow stone walls like acrobats. As we looked out at Jordan to the South and Daraa to the North, we felt we could see the entire world. Around us was an entire village of these stone arches; it was like a place out of a fairytale. To this day and throughout this war, I think of Alali as a safe place. With its heavy stone arches, it felt immovable, protected, as if it could never be knocked down.[118]

Fig 47. Multiple Generations Play at Alali, 2003, Photograph by Wafaa Almahamid.

[118] Safaa Almahamid, in conversation with the author, 2022

Although it has been four years since the incident, a lump still forms in my throat each time I revisit a photograph of the bulldozer sitting on the chapel's ruins.

Fig 48. The Bulldozer Arm on Alali's Ruins, 2024.

Within my own family, there is heated debate about the fate of Alali. The creatives ask: how can we restore and revive this space? Do we convert it into a community center, or a school, or a medical clinic? The realists respond: who will fund and physically manage the execution of such a project? These difficult conversations represent the larger debates surrounding heritage sites in tumultuous landscapes like Nasib and force us to think critically about how we define preservation. What exactly do we seek to preserve, and whom does it benefit? In this situation, we are not just dealing with the demolition of historic buildings, but the death of living people and their cultural heritage.[119]

Fig 49. Mama Takes measurements at Alali, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

[119] Pamela Karimi and Nasser Rabbat, "The Demise and Afterlife of Artifacts" In The Destruction of Cultural Heritage: From Napoléon to ISIS, (The Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative: 2016), 4

My mother recently reminded me,

> The loss of these spaces is painful indeed, but buildings can be recovered and restored; human lives cannot. Alali lives not only in our hearts and memories, but also in photographs and someday, architects may restore the church to its original condition; after all, we are a family of architects! But who will reunite us with our lost loved ones in this lifetime? How can that void ever be filled?[120]

[120] Ilham Almahamid, in conversation with the author, 2022

Fig 50. Children and Nettle Reclaim Alali, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

...As the children zig zagged and ducked under the doorways, I was struck by a vision of my mother and aunts in their youth, tiptoeing across the stone roofs. This place wasn't dead. The rubble and decay had made room for other forms of life; for Akkoub and Mallow to grow, for stray cats to seek shelter, for the pitter patter of children's footsteps. I later learned from my grandmother that the green bushes which assaulted me earlier (and which I assumed were Poison Ivy), were actually *Qurais*, or Nettle, whose sting is healing to the body, and whose leaves brew a nutrient-dense tea.

Exhausted from the adventure, I rested on a cinderblock while the children climbed the piles of gravel around the site. Hassan Ali lived and died; as did his madhafa, its storied stones later used to build a wall around the site. And yet there was still abundance here. Despite the lot lines and petty land feuds, the visions of productivity, the piles of junk, the rockets and rubble, and the loved ones left behind; the land itself was resisting, as if to remind us: things will grow, regardless of you. There will be life here, regardless of you-

TEEMING WITH THE PROMISE OF TOMORROW

"Then a mason came forth and said, Speak to us of Houses.
And he answered and said:

…Your house is your larger body.
It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night; and it is not dreamless. Does not your house dream? and dreaming, leave the city for a grove or hill-top?"[121]

-Gibran Khalil Gibran

[121] Gibran Khalil Gibran, The Prophet, Knopf, 1923

When the Syrian Jordanian border was drawn, a speculative line superimposed on a meandering geography, Nasib station on the Hejaz Railway became the final stop in Syria. My mother would often board a train from Damascus to Nasib to visit her grandparents in the 70s, but the station has since fallen out of service. The building still stands today, its broken windows stained with soot; it is currently used by residents as a vessel for burning garbage.

Fig 51. Nasib's Hijaz Station, 2021.

Today, Nasib's elders find solace in their collective memory of the *imār* they built. Generational encounters with spaces like Alali shaped the trajectory of a distinct building

culture in Nasib, which is at risk of disappearing in a sea of concrete. One wonders how many other sites like Alali are scattered throughout this region, their original owners long gone, and their histories forgotten. In the aftermath of the violence, residents across the village are rebuilding and expanding their homes. The landscape is colored white with debris, this time from construction waste that litters the roads. Throughout the village, concrete rebar reaches for the heavens, a symbol of the reconstruction. In multigenerational houses, the act of continuing the rebar vertically expresses hope for more children, space for a growing family.

Fig 52. Concrete Rebar Reaches for the Heavens, *Echoes from the Stone*, 2024, film still.

Fig 53. Workers Pour Foundation on a Construction Site, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.
Fig 54. Framework of a Concrete Column like a Sculpture in the Field, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.

Remnants of the old bluestone houses lie abandoned and forgotten, dusted with litter, soil, and ash. The loss of our material culture disconnected us further and further from the land, and from one another. As an elderly woman without a husband or son onsite to physically protect her assets, Um Ghazi currently battles a neighbor's increasing attempts to seize Alali's site for new development. She hopes that her children will restore the old building to its former glory, but with family stakeholders scattered across the world and with no end in sight to the political crisis, such a task feels impossible at the present. Until then she anxiously tends to her olive grove, breathing life into the earth when life is at its most fragile.

Fig 55. New Constructions Beyond Alali, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.

Fig 56. Restoration Work at Alali, Wafaa Almahamid, 2002.

Alali and the Byzantine structures in the village were once connected by shared walls which were demolished in the process of building roads and the introduction of formal land plots in the late 20th century. The increasing privatization of land and introduction of setbacks meant people no longer wanted to share walls with neighbors. The cultural shifts also had a devastating effect on the poetic traditions. As Sowayan explains, "traditional activities and lifestyles which caused Nabati poetry to flourish and from which it drew its material have in recent times become radically altered or have disappeared along with the lore associated with them."[122]

[122] Sowayan, 5

In Nasib, the community is not only dealing with a loss of the commons, but a disappearance of rich knowledge systems embedded there. The descendants of a people who cultivated cereal grains for centuries are forced to wait in line for soggy government bread. It is not lost on me, the cruel irony of it all. Today, the crippling economic sanctions and fuel shortages that have led to inflation and rationing of resources across the country. Um Saado's children have had to seek employment elsewhere to support their family; her sons venture out to Daraa to labor in the fields. In a recent visit, Um Saado's daughter, who currently works at a local slaughterhouse testified:

> If we sell our she-goat's offspring, the profit won't even cover the cost of her food. In years of abundant rain, we got by since the flocks could graze off the lands. But these past few years we've experienced a total drought in our region. The animals need food, they need vitamins and supplies! The profits we earn from dairy goods aren't enough to feed them; we've had to borrow money to buy feed. With no subsidization, the shepherd is [financially] broken, he lives indebted.

This is the cost of the climate crisis in Syria, not only in the south. In the case of Nasib, the disappearance of the musha'a and the increased privatization of land has not been conducive to cultivating communities of mutual aid and collaboration. European models of modernity and productivity destroyed the local ways of building and dwelling, including the adaptive reuse of the buildings, cyclical methods of land use/ownership, and collective agriculture.

There is power in remembering who we are, and where we come from. In many ways, a collective future will rely on this remembering, on alternate ways of knowing, building, and cultivating. Alali reveals that while many of the forces that shape the built environment are outside our control, how we respond is powerful. What happens if the

government builds a road through the site someday? What becomes of it, then, and how do we reclaim it? More importantly, who are the real stakeholders in this project? Once again, I find myself critical of a particular breed of design that suggests an air-conditioned cultural center attached to Alali is the answer. As Friedman and Moe suggest,

> there are no solutions, no easy repairs. At best, we can opportunistically and optimistically adapt. Tending is an art and practice of adaptation; of the apt. Observing and nudging the complex tendencies of terrestrial systems both small and large, studying them closely and engaging them directly, with practical resolve and political acuity: this is what we mean by 'tending building.'[123]

In its current state, Alali is not a monument, nor a shelter nor a house. It is a reminder of possibility, indestructible in the sense that its stones are struck by rockets, and as a result only multiply. If Alali could speak, it would sing the story of its caretakers in stanzas of Nabati poetry. Perhaps, to challenge our old friend Ruskin, architecture is not so mighty after all. On the contrary, when the architecture our hands built—with its arches of venerated stone—is blown up before our eyes, all that's left is poetry. Oral histories are not only instrumental in understanding Syria's unwritten past, but also in imagining alternate futures. Futures with reunions and reconciliations, with new seeds sowed. Futures with *madhafas*, and poetry recited over coffee. In all this uncertainty, one thing is clear: there is endless value in the stories the stones don't tell.

[123] Kiel Moe and Daniel S. Friedman, "Tending Building," Places Journal, February 2024. Accessed 14 Apr 2024. <https://placesjournal.org/article/tending-building-an-ethic-of-repair-in-architecture/>

Fig 57. A Child Plays in His Family's Old House, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.

You Are Now Leaving Syria, October 18th, 2022

Under the cloak of night, I dream in Arabic; in the daylight I speak and write my life in English. I memorize his poetry, but I don't know what all the words mean.
What I wouldn't give to take a long walk with Hassan Ali, or board a train with Faisal Almahamid!

Free to travel: no passports, borders, or prisons, only the vast sky above and red sandy soil below us.

maybe we would start in Damascus for sweet apples and grapes, and he would let me wear his cloak. Afterwards, we'd head southwest to Nablus to visit what was once my great grandmother's home, and back on course to Haifa for olive oil…I've never seen the Mediterranean Sea from Palestine, or the mountains of Lebanon that Jiddo so often spoke about. As we'd move south, he would tell stories of coming home to my mother and her siblings, his pockets full of candy and dry roasted chickpeas. I am certain, if we only had the time, he would teach me some of his grandfather's poetry-

Fig 58. Jiddo's 1996 Diary Opens with a Picture of Jidda. Photographed in Damascus 2021.

WA SALAMITKUM

Every being on earth is bound to perish.[124]

Fig 59. A Moth Amongst the Basalt, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.

[124] *The Quran* 55:2, translation by Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran.

In a gathering thick with the warm aroma of cardamom and bitter coffee, the poet finishes a recitation, looks up at the loved ones gathered around him, and utters, "wa salamitkum"*: to your well-being, and peace*. Is there a more moving sentiment than this? That a signal for the end is a wish for collective peace and well-being. A hope that even when the poetic gathering is through, the healing it offers persists and travels beyond the walls of the madhafa.

Everything must inevitably come to its close. Spring—the season I hold most dear— departs with its blossoms. The tent caterpillars of the grass grow their wings and leave the communal nest. Vibrant green becomes soft yellow, brown, and ochre. Things perish, and in their perishing, "something else lives."[125] In our neglect and abandonment of Alali, other stakeholders have flourished. In its wildness and lack of surveillance, the site has been reclaimed as a commons.

There is some comfort to be found in Stephanie Dunning's poignant reflection on the *end*:

> …when both time (history) and space (property) are lost, we witness the emergence of alternate orders of existence…because the collapse of civilization means an end to material and epistemological structures that incentivize our rupture from nature.[126]

If this is the case, isn't it also a type of preservation when the land swallows up our buildings?

[125] Stephanie Dunning, "Plant Life (Notes on the end of the world)," in Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture. (University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 131
[126] Ibid, 131

Fig 60. Nettle Rustles in the Chamber, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, film still.

The same stones we once inhabited become scaffolding for future roots to grow, for other species to thrive in our absence. As Shannon Mattern suggests, perhaps future preservation allows room for this "entropy," and considers "cultivating an acceptance of curated decay." [127] Or, in other words, facilitating practices of *tending* rather than *restoring*, which "prioritizes past states more than future prospects."[128]

In this spirit, on a sunny afternoon in Ramadan, with the help of family members, I invited the kids of the old neighborhood to participate in a shared art activity. Supplying the

[127] Shannon Mattern, Maintenance and Care, Places Journal
[128] Kiel Moe and Daniel S. Friedman, "Tending Building," Places Journal, February 2024. Accessed 14 Apr 2024. <https://placesjournal.org/article/tending-building-an-ethic-of-repair-in-architecture/>

materials proved to be a challenge—we scoured the village and made do with acrylic wall paint and pigments purchased from Nasib's local hardware store. To my despair, we arrived at the old neighborhood and only found one child; however, in typical fashion, the children magically multiplied—within five minutes the boy brought twelve friends.

After we laid down the fabric and mixed the paints together, I prompted them to paint houses, while leaving things open-ended for those compelled to experiment. Some children stuck to the prompt; they sat side by side, organized their paints, kept within self-assigned borders, and drew neat and tidy houses. Others were far more restless; they used the floor as their palette, painted over each other's work, doused each other in paint, and at one point ditched the canvas altogether and attempted to paint Alali yellow. To my relief, as things grew more hectic, parents entered the gates to chat, take pictures of their kids, and try their own hands at painting. When the canvas grew overly populated, the children began to collect rocks and CMU blocks from around the site and paint them. In all its messiness, the gathering was everything I could have hoped it would be.

As I observe the children who stand at the ruins and feel no sorrow, the grief that once consumed me feels softer, less paralyzing somehow. It's that pesky friend called time—in all its circularity and wonder—that allows me to look out at Alali now and see myself in the children instead of the ruins.

The reactivation of the site through their joy, its new wonderment and wilderness is a promise of life in the future. I am struck by the realization that this journey, much like Hassan Ali's, began with looking out at the ruin, yet it feels like for the first time, I am *seeing* it. As Azoulay so beautifully puts it,

> We must *return* to what was destroyed, to the ruins and to the possibilities that were doomed to appear as 'past.' We must rebuild and resurrect them with and for the sake of those who were colonized and expelled, with and for the sake of their descendants. The ruins should be inhabited as part of processes and formations of repair, of a slow repair that draws on the many different formations of social, political, and spiritual care that were destroyed by European technologies of violence and colonial and international law imposed on all pre-colonial communal laws.[129]

If Hassan Ali's life and verses teach us anything, it is that we have always stood at the ruins, or on the verge of ruin. Time and time again, through the generations, we rebuild anew, together from the ashes.

[129] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, "The Ruins Should Be Inhabited as Part of a Process of Repair, *Hyperallergic,* 12/11/2023

Fig 61. Children Paint in Front of Alali, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, Film Still.

Fig 62. Children Paint in Front of Alali, *Echoes from the Stone,* 2024, Film Still.

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